Otherman’s World

By Matthew Striegel

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I

Andre Jackson knew there would be trouble when the stranger walked into his Main Street Pub. He never would have guessed the nature of it ahead of time, however.

He was a grizzled, middle aged black man who had lived his entire life in Lagoda, Indiana. He ran the Main Street Pub, a rundown bar and grill serving greasy, unremarkable food for his greasy, unremarkable patrons. The people of Lagoda kept to themselves and disliked outsiders.

So, when a homeless man he didn't recognize walked in the front door, he instantly felt a flash of hostility. The man was dressed in a dinghy trench coat, had very dry skin and dark eyes that looked both glazed over and intense. The stranger looked around Andre's

regulars, who purposefully ignored him, and hunkered over their drinks.

The stranger's eyes met Andre's, who was in the kitchen pounding out a cut of beef for a roast. The window to his dining room allowed him to stare down the newcomer. Andre made him wait until he finished tenderizing and grilling the meal. The pub had no waiters; Andre brought out the meals to his patrons himself. He would make the stranger wait. Perhaps he'd get the idea and leave.

But the stranger continued to wait. Andre delivered the meal, stepped behind the counter and finally addressed the man. "What'll you have?" he asked gruffly.

"Excuse me, but is this Oakwood?" he asked.

Andre frowned. "No, this is Lagoda. Oakwood is two towns away, in the next county."

"But I am close?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just passing through. What about a Mooresville?"

"Mooresville? There hasn't been a Mooresville for years."

"But there are still people there, aren't there?"

"Man, this is a pub, not a rest stop. You want a map, go to one of those. You want food, there's the menu."

The stranger glanced at the paper on the counter but didn't pick it up.

"I have business in Mooresville. Can you direct me there? Or at least to Oakwood?"

"This bar is for paying customers. Order something or step aside."

"I have no money."

Andre's eyes narrowed. "That right? So why are you here? This isn't a charity, either. And it sure isn't an information desk. Clear out!"

"This guy bugging you, Andre?" one of his usual customers piped up. He and his drinking buddy stood and approached the counter. The stranger didn't turn around.

"Just some nosy bum," the other regular agreed. He took the stranger by the arm. "Come on pal, beat it."

The stranger pushed the man away. The second one snarled and hit him in the stomach. The stranger didn't react and the man cried out and grabbed his hand. Then the stranger punched Andre's regular, sending him sprawling.

The first man ran up behind the stranger and tried to pin his arms. The stranger began to shrug out of the trench coat, but only got it partially off as they wrestled. His chest was dry and hairless, and his back had a long scar that seemed to be widening as the two fought.

Andre ran back into the kitchen, grabbed his meat tenderizer, and rejoined the brawl. He raised the tool and shouted at the stranger.

"That's enough! Get out of here!"

The stranger threw off his attacker. Andre caught a glimpse of the man's back scar continuing to split. But he didn't have a lot of time to think about it. Dismissing it as gangrene or an open sore, Andre noted that the man was now approaching him.

"I'm warning you," Andre told him, raising the tenderizer like a cudgel.

The man continued to approach. Andre swung it, hitting the stranger's forehead. Dry skin flaked away, but surprisingly, no blood. Instead, there was a grayish skin underneath.

The stranger turned around and shrugged off the trench coat. The back wound continued to separate, and

the skin sloughed off in one piece. Like a snake molting or a moth emerging from its cocoon, the skin fell to the floor as a man shaped shell. The back now was a grey color with no visible vertebrae. Two scars below the shoulders that might have been wings could be seen, and hard bands of chitin ran up and down the figure's limbs and trunk.

Turning around, Andre saw black eyes, small nose and mouth, and a pair of antennae that curled over and behind the head like horns. Andre screamed and threw the tenderizer at the enemy.

But the thing turned around and ran out the door. To Andre's side, the two customers got to their feet. Shakily, they approached the discarded skin shell and coat. One kicked it hesitantly with his toe and put a crack in it. Apparently, it was as thin and brittle as the discarded shell of any animal that shed their layers.

"What was it?" he asked Andre. "What was it?"

"I've seen things," Andre answered. "But nothing like that."

He slowly approached the door and looked outside. It was a clear night, and the street was empty. The streetlights revealed nothing, human or otherwise, on the main drag of backwoods Lagoda. If not for the unearthly shell, there was no evidence of the entity.

II

Several days later, in another bar, Aaron Adams was working on a beer and a hundred questions. Currently in Washington DC, he'd only been to the nation's capital a handful of times. An archivist and historian by training, his work for the FBI had landed him in the most unbelievable of classified operations.

Four years ago, he had been sent to Matheson County, Indiana. One of the state's smaller counties, it had only two towns: Oakwood and Rodman. The remains of an abandoned third town, Mooresville, had been chosen as the site of a secret research facility.

Aaron smiled wryly to himself and sipped his beer. Conspiracy theorists thought all the juicy secrets were in some Southwestern desert. Little did they know that contact with other worlds had been initiated in the backwoods of the Midwest.

The Mooresville facility had been researching teleportation. Devices known as gateways had been built that could transport people to other worlds. The first such attempt had taken Aaron and a group of others to Somnus, a planet orbiting a red star on the far side of Orion.

There, they had discovered the othermen, a race of sentient humanoid insects, not unlike termites. The othermen, for the most part, lived in a Society, a social insect hierarchy bioengineered in the distant past by the othermen's ancestors. But there was conflict on Somnus, between the Society and the Outliers, independent othermen who nursed ambition and the desire for more freedom. The humans who had ventured to Somnus found themselves caught in the middle and had barely escaped back home.

Since then, the facility at Mooresville had monitored Somnus, but had not returned. Aaron's superiors wanted to keep the othermen's existence a secret and see if any counter mission would come from them.

"Mr. Adams?"

Aaron looked up and saw an older man in military fatigues. The man waved and sat beside him. After

looking him up and down with his steel grey eyes, Aaron noted in turn the close-cropped grooming and general bearing that suggested a career officer.

"I'm Colonel Dressler. I understand you're part of the Mooresville project?"

"Mooresville Gaming?" Aaron asked, mentioning the operation's cover. He didn't know the colonel and was sworn to secrecy. Somnus was on a strict need to know policy. "Yeah, but I'm just a bookkeeper. I don't program any of the games."

Dressler chuckled. "Good to see you know not to shoot off your mouth. But I'm already aware of Somnus and the othermen."

Aaron finished his beer and let Dressler continue.

"Lieutenant Colonel Thomas finished her report, and now we're ready to discuss things with you."

He stood and pointed to the door. "If you'll follow me, please."

Aaron nodded, threw a few dollars on the bar, and stood. He followed Dressler outside where a black car was parked on the curb. FBI agents opened the back doors for them and drove the pair through the streets of Washington to their headquarters.

The drive was almost completely silent, as was the escort to a secluded conference room. Three people were already seated at a table. One was Keisha Thomas, the main military liaison for the Mooresville project. The other two were men in dark suits whom he didn't know. One was about Dressler's age from his looks, and the other younger and more muscular.

All three stood when Aaron and the colonel entered. The older man extended a hand. "Mr. Adams, good afternoon. "I'm Agent Ross, Homeland Security. This is

Agent Hailey, of the CIA. You already know Lieutenant Colonel Thomas."

While the Mooresville project was primarily an FBI operation, there were also personnel with the Pentagon, and other American intelligence agencies in the loop.

"So, we all know why we're here," Ross began. He pointed to a photograph on the table. It had been taken by a camera phone and showed a wooded area. It was nighttime, and there was a figure between the trees. While hard to see, it had unmistakable darkened eyes and antennae.

"Dressler and Thomas have been discussing how best to respond to this," Ross continued. "But first, would you verify the identity of this creature, Mr. Adams?"

"It appears to be an otherman," Adams confirmed. His brow furrowed and he peered closer at it. "But I don't see any wings."

"Terrific," Hailey grumbled. "The conspiracy theorists and paranormal nuts are going to love this."

"The photo is online, and went viral about three days ago," Ross told Adams. "Thomas here has already confirmed that they've seen nothing while monitoring Somnus through the gateway."

"No sir," Aaron said. "We believe that the othermen are avoiding the location where we first arrived. Whatever they've been doing, or not doing, they obviously don't want us to see."

"And do you think they've been trying to make a gateway of their own?" Dressler asked.

"I don't know, but I think they would want to," Aaron answered.

“Remember that they stole the blueprints for the portals and tried to dismantle ours the last time we saw them. But I don't know how much manufacturing capability they have."

He looked around at the others. "We also don't know their entire history and culture. But one thing that was apparent was that they had had a world war sometime in their past. A war that nearly destroyed them. They survived, but live relatively primitive now."

"Except for the queen of their society," Keisha reminded him.

"Arachne," Aaron nodded. "Right. She has a stash of advanced devices from before their last war, or 'Before', as they say. Including disintegration bombs, a type of artificial telepathy and a sentient robot."

"The Pilot," Ross recalled. "I've read your account of the first mission. Do you think the Pilot could read the blueprints and reverse engineer the gateway portal?"

"I'm sure he could understand how to," Aaron said. "But again, whether he had the manufacturing ability, I don't know."

"There is one thing about all of this that's comforting," Keisha said. "The fact that we're seeing an otherman here shows that at least they will be coming near where we are. We don't have to worry about their appearing anywhere else without expecting it."

"Well, apparently not," Ross said. "We've been keeping an eye on any alleged paranormal sightings. So far, there are no other reports that could be them."

"We're planning on stationing a larger unit in the Mooresville area," Dressler told Aaron. "At least

temporarily. A full base may be in order, but we won't be too hasty. Yet."

"The official story will be training exercises," Hailey said. "Particularly in and around Lagoda."

"But first, we'd like to go through the portal," Ross said. For a moment, the professional demeanor dropped and he allowed a flash of giddiness to show. Aaron understood; even after four years, the reality of the situation seemed like something out of the science fiction stories he read as a kid. Truth was stranger than fiction, indeed.

III

They all walked over to the room across the hall. Although the gateways were not being deployed for any official missions yet, one had been brought to Washington to enable quick travel. It was currently

activated, and they could see Dr. Ellis Harlan, chief Mooresville technician, at the other end.

Harlan, an ageing heavyset man with grey eyes and thinning blond hair, smiled and waved at them. Aaron waved back and they stepped through. There were no unusual sensations; moving through the gate felt no different from walking through a door. Still, one moment he was in the nation's capital, the next found him in rural Indiana. A quick glance at the clock to see the time difference confirmed he'd travelled hundreds of miles in a single step.

The others followed and Harlan nodded respectively. "Gentlemen. Welcome to Mooresville Gaming."

"Thank you," Ross said, looking back over his shoulder. The office where they had left was still visible. "Extraordinary."

"Would you like to see Somnus?" Harlan asked the newcomers.

They nodded, and Harlan led them to the other side of the room. In front of computer terminals being monitored by technicians was another portal. This one showed a view of an empty plain bathed in red sunlight. A jungle could be seen in the distance, along with a river.

In the sky, they saw another bright object, although it was daytime. The James Webb telescopes confirmed the existence of a second planet in the Somnus solar system. Dubbed Phaeton, it was a smaller rocky world orbiting in a vast irregular ellipsis. Like Sedna in their own solar system, it was approaching close to the sun and would pass close by Somnus for several months before heading out to the outer system once more. At the edge of the solar system was an asteroid belt;

Phaeton was most likely a larger escaped member of the belt.

Ross, Hailey and Dressler watched the alien skies for several minutes. They also scanned the panorama for othermen, but in vain. Whatever their plans were regarding Earth had, until recently, remained their own.

"We've been adjusting the frequency of the portals," Harlan told the newcomers. "As you know, while we have been able to bring up other places on Earth..."

"Hence the one in Washington," Ross said.

"...we can't seem to pinpoint anywhere else on Somnus except for the site we always pick up."

"Have you any idea why?" Dressler asked.

"Not a definite one," Harlan confessed. "However, I believe it's a matter of the distance involved."

He turned and nodded to a technician behind the monitors. "Arthur, bring up the moon signal, will you?"

The young Asian American, Arthur Takamori, was Harlan's protégé and had been at the Mooresville installation about as long has he had been. Takamori hit a few buttons on his terminal and the view of Somnus vanished. The portal face temporarily was a flat metal surface with several formulae etched into its surface. Then, the view changed to a cold pockmarked landscape. A flag could be seen in the distance, and a cold feeling came from the portal.

"The landing site where Neil Armstrong took his small step," Harlan confirmed.

"Incredible," Dressler whispered. "If only the Apollo missions had had this. You could just walk through and be there."

"Well, I wouldn't without a spacesuit, colonel," Adams said, smiling.

The agents snickered, and Keisha put her hand over her mouth to cover a smile. "I know that, Adams," Dressler replied, annoyed.

"Arthur, adjust the portal to the next closest position you can get," Harlan said.

"Sure thing, Ellis," Arthur replied. He hit a few buttons and the lunar view changed. They didn't especially recognize the spot, but Arthur immediately filled them in.

"This is about fifty miles away," he said. "That’s about as precise as we can be, although here on Earth, we could potentially go anywhere in the western hemisphere."

"But not through the planet to the other side?" Hailey asked.

"No. And we can't go to the dark side of the moon either. As for Somnus, it's far enough away that it makes

too small a target to fine tune the destination. We've tried but either hit Erebus, the point where we first looked, or not at all."

"So, if we went to, say, Mars or Europa, we'd have fewer and fewer places we could hit with any precision," Ross guessed.

"We haven't tried that, since we're supposed to be keeping an eye on Somnus, but I'd say probably," Arthur agreed. "It's like shooting a target; the further away it is, the harder it gets to hit it at all, let alone the bull's eye."

"Or imagine if you were in a space ship leaving the Earth at a right angle," Harlan continued. "The further and further away you went, the smaller and smaller the distance between the sun and Earth would look. Eventually, you'd be so far out that you'd only see the sun. Then, not even that."

"The star Somnus orbits isn't even visible from Earth without a telescope," Aaron said. "So, we're probably lucky we can get there at all, instead of opening a portal to its sun. Unfortunately, that means we can’t investigate the other planet, Phaeton."

"Well, it seems to be smaller and probably wouldn't have life," Ross said. "Not othermen anyway."

"On the plus side, the othermen coming here would be in the same position," Keisha pointed out. "The one was sighted in Lagoda, which is several miles north in the next county. I'm surprised they didn't just appear here. But Lagoda’s still in Southern Indiana. Still America. We shouldn't have to worry about them appearing anywhere and everywhere."

"So it seems. For now, at least," Hailey said. He sighed. "After the picture went public, I went to Lagoda and got the shell it left behind. I think I intimidated the

pub owner enough to stay quiet. But still, I already have tips from other agents in the field. Camera crews from more than one network are considering investigation. We need to be careful not to make this any worse than it already is."

"Speaking of which," Ross spoke up. "The shell was left here, since you had been researching other samples from the last time they were here. Have you found anything new?"

"Let's go see Dr. Takamori in the infirmary," Harlan said.

They looked at Arthur, who smiled. "My wife. She's the installation's physician."

They all went down the hall to the infirmary. Dr. Rachel Takamori, a petite, attractive woman with short brown hair and blue eyes, sat at a station. She was looking at one of the samples under a microscope. When

she looked up, she put on her glasses, stood, and nodded respectively at the group.

"Doctor, I'm Agent Ross. This is Agent Hailey and Colonel Dressler."

"Hello."

"What can you report on the shell?"

She shrugged. "Not much beyond what we already know. It's definitely an otherman, and they, in turn, have biology not unlike our own insects. We've been trying to extract DNA samples, but so far it seems incomplete."

"All right. Keep working on it. We need to see what kind of weaknesses they have."

"I'm going to return to Washington," Dressler said. "I need to get the detachment for transfer here."

"We might need to expand the barracks," Harlan said. "Most of us already live here permanently. Unless you want us to move into Oakwood or something."

"On the contrary," Ross answered. "I want all of you to stay at the installation. Don't even go into town until we get this situation contained."

The others looked at each other. "Is that an order?" Aaron asked.

Ross raised his eyebrows. "Does it have to be?"

IV

"I'm home."

Arthur walked into his apartment. The complex was next to the Mooresville installation. He and Rachel had lived there since getting married. Overall, he liked it. They got the housing as part of their payment, and Oakwood was close enough to drive into town. At least until now, and Rachel was beginning to have her doubts.

"Hey," she called from their room. He went in and found her already in her nightgown and sitting up in

bed. "What took you?" she asked as he leaned over for a kiss.

"Keisha had me and Aaron help her rearrange her furniture," he told her. "She bought a bunch of new stuff at an estate sale."

"Then it wasn't new."

"You know what I mean."

"Arthur…do you ever worry that we may be trapped here?"

He frowned and sat next to her. "Because of the work? Well, we kind of are as it is. We're sworn to secrecy and all that. But is it so bad? We're being paid well, we're seeing things no one else is, and we are allowed to see our families a few times a year. Just limited time. And I'm sure we'd be in a lot of trouble if we told the truth of what we do, but come on. Not worth it, and only the crazy people would believe us anyway."

"I know all of that, and as for us, it's fine. But what if we had children? Are they just going to be sheltered here?"

"Well, we probably wouldn't be allowed to tell them later."

"Yeah, sure. But you know they'd find out eventually. Living here day in and day out, how could they not?"

"I guess so. I don’t know." He shook his head. "Maybe we should hold off on those kinds of decisions. At least until we find the otherman who made it to Earth."

"About that." Rachel lay down on the bed and stretched her arms. Reaching for her nightstand, she grabbed something, sat back up, and handed it to Arthur. At first, he thought it was a pen. But when he turned it over, he saw it was a pregnancy test. A positive one.

"Oh. Ohhhh."

He looked at Rachel, who ran a hand nervously through her pixie cut hair. Her blue eyes had all the joy and fear that accompanied new motherhood. Arthur put the test in her lap and his arms around her.

"Well," He grinned sheepishly. "At least we know what causes that now."

She laughed and he kissed her.

V

Mooresville installation and the apartment complex where its personnel lived faced each other. Both were at the end of a road going through a field. At the other end of the field, where the road branched off from the state highway, was an old fenced in graveyard. This was the only thing left of the original town. The foundations of the buildings were long gone, and the farm fields had been reclaimed by wildflowers and grasses before Aaron had even been born.

The field was now occupied by a squad of soldiers setting up an obstacle course. Over the last few weeks, Colonel Dressler had led a couple of convoys to Mooresville and they were preparing to set up training exercises. This was to maintain their cover story.

Aaron sat on the stone fence of the graveyard and watched them. He typed notes into his laptop for the 'official' records. Only the very highest ranking personnel would know about the real objective. Indeed, Aaron wondered how many of these soldiers knew about the othermen yet.

More eyewitness pictures had trickled on the internet, showing their visitor lurking in the woods near Lagoda. Oddly enough, there were no pictures of the being, or beings in flight. He knew because he searched online every day, using keywords like 'Lagoda', 'cryptids', 'aliens', 'monsters', and so on. They were keeping a low

profile but seemed to be almost deliberately hinting at their presence. What were they up to?

He heard a motor behind him and looked over his shoulder. A civilian car was driving through the woods towards him. It pulled up next to the graveyard, and a young sandy haired, wide-eyed man came out. He took out his cell phone and hit the record button.

Aaron set his laptop on the stone fence and hopped down. Walking towards the young man, he took him for a reporter, amateur or professional. Great.

"Good morning," Aaron greeted him. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Kel Jameson," the man introduced himself. "Oakwood News."

Formerly a newspaper, Oakwood News was an online source of local information. Aaron knew why he was here before he even elaborated.

"You’ve probably heard about the sightings in Lagoda," Jameson began. "Some type of cryptid or what not."

Aaron tried to look casual. "You're not becoming a tabloid, are you, Kelly?"

The man looked irked. "Kel."

"Sorry. Kel."

Aaron supposed he shouldn't be rude. For his part, Kel looked over Aaron's shoulder. Seeing the army men, he raised an eyebrow.

"May I ask what's going on here? I thought the nearest army base was hours away."

"Training exercises."

"And you are?"

"Aaron Adams," he replied, shaking Jameson's hand. "I'm the archivist."

Aaron picked up his laptop and tucked it under his arm. "Would you like to talk to the CO?"

"Thanks."

Aaron led Kel across the field. The grasses were still fairly high, but fortunately the sun was out and the dew had evaporated. Aaron saw Dressler leading a squad of men in a jog. Aaron waved over to Dressler, and then saluted.

"Sir. A civilian to see you, sir."

Dressler halted his men and addressed Kel. "I'm Colonel Dressler. What seems to be the problem?"

"No problem, colonel. Kel Jameson, Oakwood News. I was just here to see what was going on. I heard reports of a military unit here."

"That's right. A group of army reserves," Dressler confirmed. It was technically true. "We're doing

training exercises in the event their unit is activated and sent to the Middle East."

"Beg your pardon, sir, but why here? Matheson County's hardly a desert."

"A good soldier is familiar with all types of terrain, Mr. Jameson."

"But isn't this the property of Mooresville Gaming? It seems to be an unusual arrangement, doesn’t it?"

"Not as strange as it may look," Dressler answered, casually looking back towards the buildings. "Some of the engineers are also in the reserves, and the company itself wished to serve their country. So, they volunteered the property they weren't using."

"Hundreds of acres and several square miles," Aaron added. "There used to be a town here, you know."

"Of course." Kel looked across the field. "Pardon me, colonel, but are you familiar with the sightings in Lagoda?"

"Not really. My duties keep me busy."

Jameson persisted. "Some kind of humanoid creature. Maybe alien..."

Dressler chuckled. "Son, you've been reading too many stories about Area 51. Surely you know not to believe everything you see on the web?"

"Then you deny the military presence here is connected?"

"Certainly not." Dressler frowned slightly. "Frankly, it's none of your business, but if you like, feel free to talk to Dr. Harlan. He's the head developer over at the game labs. Adams here can take you."

"I'll do that. Thank you, colonel."

"Jameson."

Dressler barked some orders at his men and led them to resume their run along the field's parameter. Aaron led Jameson up the road to the main lobby of the installation. It was designed to look like any nondescript office building. Beyond the reception area were offices and rooms where video game development was taking place.

There was no secretary, so Aaron led him through another set of double doors. He was hoping Ellis and Arthur would be around. They usually started the day puttering around with the gaming programs to 'warm up' before spending the rest of the day on portal duty. Those areas, and the infirmary, were in the basement. So as long as Kel didn't demand a tour, there was no worry he'd ever suspect those.

Fortunately, the two hadn't deviated from their routine. They were test playing a level on their new

game as Aaron led Kel over to them. Cutting up with each other, they were, thankfully, both in a good mood. It would make selling the illusion of normalcy easier.

"Dr. Harlan. Dr. Takamori,” Aaron greeted them. "This is Kel Jamison, from Oakwood News. He's doing a story on the army exercises."

"Good morning," Ellis greeted. "Have you talked to Colonel Dressler? He should be outside now with morning calisthenics."

"Yes, he was. He sent me in here," Kel answered. "I just found it unusual for an army reserve training here all of a sudden..."

He trailed off and noted the game being worked on. "Say, is that One Ship?"

Arthur grinned. "It sure is. Captain Harris' latest encounter with the Durovians. I call it 'Legend of the One Ship.'”

Kel chuckled. “I loved that game back in college.”

“Well, would you like to see?"

Arthur waved Kel over. "It's going to be more of a role-playing game. A quest on an occupied Durovian planet."

Kel sat at the terminal while Arthur chatted about the game. Kel even got to play a level or two, almost forgetting why he had first come. Aaron and Ellis looked at each other and exchanged a secret smile. That couldn't have turned out better if it had been planned ahead of time.

Later, Harlan showed Jameson the cover documents, outlining the lending of Mooresville land to the army for training. Then, Aaron escorted him back through the field to his car.

"If anything changes, here's my card," Kel said, handing Aaron his name and number. Aaron took it and promised he would.

Kel looked around the area again. "I don't know," he said after a moment. "I still wonder what's going on in Lagoda."

It was rhetorical, so Aaron didn't answer. Truth be told, he wondered too.

VI

The next evening, Aaron sat in the conference room with Ellis, Arthur, Keisha, Dressler, Ross and Hailey. The last two were reading the latest articles on the Oakwood news website. One was about the forthcoming Legend of the One Ship. The other was about the military training.

"No mention of aliens yet, at least," Aaron offered.

"Yet," Hailey repeated sourly. "But reporters, particularly eager young ones straight out of school,

don't give up. We have to find this otherman before someone else does."

"Some of my unit is staking out Lagoda," Keisha told them. "Nothing yet."

"Or so we think," Ross said. "As you're all aware, they can disguise themselves to look human."

"I've been thinking about that myself," Aaron remarked. They all looked at him.

"Trying to think like they might," he continued.

"Well?" Hailey asked.

"For one thing, I doubt they'd come out in broad daylight. Our sun is brighter than the sun of Somnus. They'd probably find it unpleasant."

"That’s not unreasonable," Ross agreed. "What else?"

"I also think there's only one, or a few at the most. Not a squad or anything. They were only inside the installation briefly, the last time they were here."

"And we know more about the weather and terrain of Somnus than they do about Earth," Keisha agreed. "That would make them cautious."

"All probably true, but pictures of them have still gotten out," Hailey replied. "We need to find them and take them in."

"It's my turn to search tonight," Keisha said. "I was leaving soon." She turned to Aaron. "Would you like to come along?"

Aaron had nothing else to do, so he agreed.

Aaron wasn't happy to be driving. It was night, foggy, and drizzling. Aaron could barely see as he drove through Lagoda's main drag, such as it was. He glanced

over at the pub where the otherman had first been sighted. Even now, there were a few locals inside. No other cars were on the road, although he knew other military men and women were staked out at other points in the small town.

They would have their engines on, but headlights off. One would be driving while the other would be wearing infrared goggles and carrying a heavy rifle. They knew from their past encounter that smaller side arms wouldn't hurt the othermen, but they were better prepared this time.

Naturally, Keisha was the shooter of their duo. She scanned the road ahead, waiting.

"Anything?"" he asked her quietly.

She shook her head. "Just the locals."

"And they keep to themselves," he remarked dryly.

"Be nice. I'm from Oakwood, myself."

"Really?"

"Really. My dad was a police detective for years before retiring."

"What kind of cases?"

"Whatever came up. Drugs, murder, robbery. Even the Oakwood Riots a few years ago."

"I'm from Baltimore, originally," he told her. "But we moved around a lot growing up. Army brat. I have family all over."

"How come you joined the FBI instead of active service?"

"I was never the physical type. I thought recordkeeping, bureaucratic work would still be serving my country, but safer."

He laughed. "Of course, I never signed up for hunting aliens."

"Who does? Take a right here."

They turned into an alley at the north end of town. A row of run down, apparently abandoned houses greeted them. He pulled off to the curb, put the car in park and turned off the headlights. For several minutes, the only sound was the pattering of the rain. A bolt of lightning flashed, illuminating the houses for a second.

Creepy, Aaron thought. *Like the type of place that would be haunted. Pity the ghosts and aliens couldn't just take care of each other.*

"Hey! I saw something," Keisha said, pointing to the furthest house.

Aaron didn't have night vision headgear, and there were no streetlights. Still, he thought he saw a shadow running up to the porch. Lightning flashed again, and while he couldn't make out any detail, he saw the front door slam shut. A moment later, something even stranger happened.

A faint light came on in an upstairs window.

They looked at each other tensely. Keisha pulled out her walkie talkie.

"All units, this is Thomas. Sighting at the abandoned house in sector one. Repeat, possible intruder at the abandoned alley. Acknowledge and move into position."

Aaron heard each pair of soldiers check in and confirm their orders. He knew they would be closing in quickly but quietly in hopes of cutting off the otherman's escape options. Assuming it was an otherman and not some human vagabond.

Of course, there was only one way to find out, and Keisha was already leaving the car. Aaron turned off the engine, pocketed the keys, and ran out into the rain. The two quickly made it to the porch. Keisha held up her gun, and was ready to kick the door in, but Aaron held

up a hand. Reaching for the doorknob, he turned it and found it unlocked.

"Get behind me," Keisha ordered. Aaron didn't argue and stepped aside for her.

They entered a darkened parlor. Dust and debris littered the floor. A set of rickety stairs led up to an open room from which the light emanated.

"Anyone here?" Keisha called out loudly. "Hey!"

They heard a faint tapping sound.

"Answer me!" she yelled up the stairs.

No voice replied, but the tapping continued. "I'm coming up! Stay where you are!"

She climbed the creaking stairs with Aaron following. What he was supposed to do he didn’t know, but wasn't about to split up. They reached the top and peered into the illuminated room.

An old lamp lit up the space. Next to it, an otherman sat in a dry rotted chair. Aaron could see it was a male and was tapping his foot. The otherman's demeanor suggested expectation.

"I know you two," he said. "Aaron Adams and Keisha Thomas."

"Ranyos," Aaron answered.

Keisha raised her weapon. "Stay where you are," she repeated.

The two humans knew the otherman before them all too well. When they first used the portals and discovered Somnus, Aaron and Keisha had been among those who had first gone there. Almost immediately, they had been discovered by the othermen. Initially, the inhabitants of Somnus pretended to be unintelligent. Then the humans stumbled onto a graveyard. The

othermen considered this an act of desecration and revealed their true nature to the humans.

What followed were a series of events in which the othermen used a mental weapon against them, took the survivors prisoner, and snuck into the Mooresville installation disguised as humans. If not for the quick thinking of their friends on Earth, Aaron and Keisha would still be the othermens' prisoners. If not executed.

This particular otherman, Ranyos, had been in the middle of events. He had been the chief drone for the otherman queen, Arachne. However, Ranyos' ambitions exceeded his loyalty, and he tried to manipulate the humans and the Society against each other. He was caught and captured, the humans were released, and an uneasy truce had existed ever since.

"How did you get here?" Keisha demanded. "What do you want?"

"That is a long story," Ranyos answered.

"I like stories. Talk!"

Ranyos raised his hands in surrender. Slowly, he stood and Keisha tensed. She cocked the trigger on her rifle, ready and willing to shoot him if he tried anything.

However, the otherman merely stood and turned around. Aaron and Keisha saw two ugly scars on his back. All othermen normally had wings after their molting into adulthood. Ranyos previously had been no exception. Now, however, his skin was puckered and deformed where his wings had once been.

"What happened to you?" Aaron asked, curious in spite of himself.

"As you know, I tried to take over the Society," Ranyos explained. "I wanted to return the Outliers to it. We had stagnated since the time Before. I thought the Outliers could provide new blood and new ideas."

Aaron thought about what he knew about the othermens' history. In a time, millennia past, what the othermen called 'Before', they had been more technologically advanced, slightly more so than Earth was now. But the invention of a mind control device and ongoing tension between rival factions had led to the Thought war, in which the othermen nearly destroyed themselves. The survivors had created the Society, genetically altered themselves to be more like social insects than individuals, and had lived for ages in a peaceful, but primitive postwar world.

"I was found out by Arachne. She punished me by cutting off my wings," Ranyos continued. His face contorted in mingled pain and anger. "Then she cauterized the wounds, permanently damaging them. I've tried to reverse cocoon, and regenerate them, but I can't. I'll never fly again."

Aaron didn't know whether to pity Ranyos or not. Part of him did. On the other hand, Ranyos had been their enemy as well. Moreover, before falling out of favor with Arachne, he had been a Deceiver, or spy. Could Aaron trust anything he said?

"Yet she spared your life," Aaron said.

Ranyos nodded. "I'll let you judge her mercy and justice. At any rate, I was flown and dropped several hundred miles east of the Society's hive. I was alone for over a year. No Society, no Outliers, just whatever plant and animal life I could scavenge to stay alive."

"Go on," Keisha said.

"I wandered northwest, hoping to circle around the Society and eventually reach the city of the Outliers."

He knelt down and began drawing in the dust. He made four dots and a line through them.

"This first one is the city of the Outliers," he explained. "The next three are Erebus, where you first arrived, the Society, and where I was left."

Ranyos then drew diagonal lines from the first and last points, making a triangle. At the apex, he made another dot. He then traced his finger along the right side of the triangle.

"I followed this route until I reached here."

He tapped the dot at the triangle's apex.

"What's there?" Aaron asked. It wasn't anywhere they would have been last time.

"Another ruined city from Before," Ranyos told them. "A much larger and better preserved one. It is called Mariamne."

"Did you find the Outliers there?" Keisha asked.

Ranyos traced his finger down the left side of the triangle.

"I finally found my way back to the smaller city and led the Outliers to Mariamne," he said. "For another few years, we lived there, restoring it and making a much better life than they had before. We might have stayed there, content with our fate."

"Then why didn't you?" Keisha asked. "And how did you get here?"

"I didn't trust Arachne. So, I occasionally snuck back into the Society to spy on her."

"That couldn't have been easy," Aaron remarked. "She had mechanical eyes grafted into her head. They let her see for miles around."

"Yes. But I am a Deceiver," Ranyos said, with noticeable pride. "Recently, I overheard her say she had managed to reverse engineer your gateway portals. She doesn't trust you anymore than you trust her."

"Or you," Keisha said. Her walkie talkie squawked and she took it from her belt.

"We're here," a voice told her.

"Good. Form a parameter around the house," she ordered. "Send two pairs inside to search the rest of the premises. Be careful; the building's in bad shape."

"Yes, ma'am."

Aaron heard the door downstairs open and the sound of the rain became slightly less muffled. Another lightning bolt flashed.

"I found their gate and jumped through," Ranyos said, wrapping up his story. "I felt it only fair to warn you Arachne is planning on something. A commando team here, very soon. She wants to neutralize any threat you may pose to her."

"So, you just decided to come here?" Aaron asked.

"Out of the goodness of your heart?" Keisha added, with more sarcasm. "You just jumped through the gate with no knowledge of whether you could get back home?"

"I wasn't too concerned," Ranyos said with a shrug. "Arachne had to reverse engineer the technology, but you invented it. I'm sure you've made more devices and travelled to other places since we met."

"We've been watching Somnus," Aaron began.

"Don't tell him anything," Keisha cut him off.

The door opened. Flashlights shined on all of them as two more soldiers entered the room. They took one look at the otherman and pointed their weapons at him.

"House is secure," one of them reported.

"Are we alone?" she asked.

"No othermen except for this one," he confirmed.

"What about devices or alien tech?" She remembered the thought devices.

"Nothing."

"I am alone," Ranyos confirmed. "As I said, I wished to warn you. I've had a lot of time to think since my exile. Our initial reaction to you was...mishandled. Needless blood was shed. Now, I would atone for it by warning you. Help me return to Somnus and join the Outliers against Arachne."

VII

So Ranyos was taken back to Mooresville installation. After the agents and Dressler asked him about the nature of his 'mission', they sent him to the infirmary. Rachel had examined othermen the last time they were here. Skin samples were still preserved in their cold storage.

Still, the chance to gather more information was always welcome, and Rachel had had questions after examining the shell he left behind in Lagoda. She took blood samples and living cell samples and ran a thorough analysis.

"I found out the source of my confusion," Rachel told the group. All of them, including Arthur and Ellis, were gathered around the conference table. Ranyos had been put into a makeshift cell with a guard both inside and outside. For the moment, he had cooperated with them, although none of the humans trusted him.

"What do you mean?" Ross asked.

"The DNA samples from Ranyos are missing several sequences that were present in the other samples. At first, I thought the newer one was simply corrupted. But that didn't make any sense, because the skin shell is

almost complete. I can confirm now Ranyos has significant differences from ‘typical’ othermen samples."

She took a breath before continuing. "The missing genes are for enzymes that blunt the activity of the amygdala, the part of the brain which controls aggression."

"So Ranyos is more aggressive than the typical male drone?" Aaron asked. "He's more ambitious and devious than other males, as far as I could tell, but I wouldn't call him mentally unbalanced."

"Nor I," Harlan agreed. "And he captured me, remember?"

"I don't think Ranyos has a disorder," Rachel said. "I think he's a wild type."

"Come again?" Dressler asked.

"Well, we know the othermen altered themselves after some kind of world war," she continued. "They

made their female descendants infertile, except for the queen. They blunted aggression and increased submissiveness."

Rachel, in addition to getting married, had spent a good portion of the last four years reading and educating herself on genetics and genetic engineering. She recalled some of what she had learned before continuing.

"I don't know exactly how the othermen did it," she said. "But one way of introducing new genetic traits here on Earth is using a virus as the vector. The viral DNA is replaced with the DNA for the desired trait. Then the subject is 'infected' with the altered virus. The new genes get incorporated into the target cells' nuclei..."

"And instead of producing more viruses and getting sick, the new trait is expressed," Ross said,

understanding. "Yes. If they made a protein targeting the brain and the reproductive system, they could suppress the traits they needed to make individuals into the Society."

"Except now, the mutations are starting to revert back," Aaron pointed out. "Remember the Outliers. And evidently, Ranyos is one too, although he was better able to hide it than most of the others. But why?"

"If you compare it to bacterial resistance, you'll see the mutations of suppression proteins take up more energy and amino acids which the cell could use for other purposes," Rachel said. "Like when bacteria make more penicillinase to survive penicillin exposure. The bacteria are actually making so much effort to survive, they're less virulent than the original wild type. They don't seem to be because penicillin can no longer kill them, but they are."

She paused again to let them process. "But take away the penicillin, and the bacterial cells will revert to wild type. It's easier, biologically, for them."

"So, the othermen's bodies are starting to revert back," Aaron said. "Will the Society revert to the time Before?"

"I would guess so, eventually. But it will probably take a long time. We don't know exactly how long the Society has existed. It could take hundreds or thousands of years."

"All this is interesting, scientifically," Hailey said. "It really is. But it still doesn't help us with the otherman here now. We don't know what he wants or why. We just have his word, which we know is unreliable at best."

"I kept some of my soldiers in Lagoda," Keisha said. "Just to make sure there aren't any others. So far, none

have been seen. No new sightings. As far as Ranyos being alone, I think he really is."

"Another thing. People have seen him," Hailey continued. "What are we supposed to do about that? The reporter..."

"Jameson," Aaron said, handing Hailey the card.

"He's poking around, looking for something."

"Ellis and I have been thinking about an idea," Arthur said. "Especially since he was interested in One Ship."

Kel Jamison and a cameraman drove into Lagoda the next evening. An anonymous tip had reported another sighting of the creature supposedly lurking in the woods. Hoping against hope, he was bringing a camera bigger than his phone and looking for answers.

He still had his suspicions about the Mooresville gaming company and the army unit there. Yes, they had been courteous and cooperative. They even shared documentation when they didn’t have to. He wasn't a cop with a warrant, after all. On the other hand, he wasn't investigating a crime. Just a possible conspiracy.

Truth be told, he had previously been skeptical about the alien and UFO urban legends. Ironically, the most unbelievable part for him had been the notion of aliens in league with the government. If the universe had beings that could travel interstellar, if not interdimensional distances, and if they could appear and disappear at will, then why would they need to cooperate with any human institution? They'd just swoop in and take what they wanted.

Now, it was hitting closer to home. A little town like Lagoda never wanted attention, but was reporting

something. While there had been no reports of spacecraft, the creature was reportedly some kind of alien or monster or…what?

They drove into Lagoda and headed to an alley with several abandoned houses. Allegedly, this was the main place where the entity lurked after its appearance in the pub. He pulled over and turned off the lights.

"Keep an eye out for anything suspicious," he told the cameraman.

"Yeah, sure," he replied. "You really think we're going to see something?"

"I don't know," Kel confessed. "But something weird is going on here."

They sat in relative silence for half an hour. Kel read over his notes while his cameraman swept his equipment over the view. He wouldn’t start recording anything until they saw something.

Kel was beginning to think his cameraman was right and this was a big waste of time. Right when he was about to forget it and drive home, the other journalist tensed up and hit the record button.

"What is it?" Kel asked.

"Shh," the cameramen shushed him, and pointed to one of the houses. A dark figure walked in the front yard. Was it just some person? Or what they were looking for? The houses hadn't been lived in for years, judging by their appearance.

Kel slowly opened the door and stepped out. "Come on," he whispered. The cameraman complied, and they shut the doors as quietly as they could. The figure stiffened and looked around. Then, it ducked into the front door.

Kel ran up to the door and fished for his camera. Finding it, he pulled it out, turned on the flashlight, and opened the door.

He flashed the light and heard a scream.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

The voice was human.

"I'm not armed," Kel said, to his relief and confusion. Shining the light, he saw not one, but two people. One was none other than Aaron Adams.

"You?! What are you doing here?" Kel demanded.

"Busted," Aaron told the other person, whose back was to Kel. It turned around, and Kel cried out. The cameraman stepped into the house and was recording.

The second person was dressed in some dry leathery material. Grayish in color, and with a hairless head and black eyes, it resembled what was supposedly seen in the pub. The figure reached for its neck and peeled the

head covering off. Underneath was an Asian American man, not anything unearthly.

"Dr. Takamori?"

Kel couldn't believe it. What was this?

Outside, a siren could be seen and heard. A policeman came in and he did have a gun.

"Police! Don't move!"

All four raised their hands.

"I was patrolling when I saw a light in here. You are all trespassing on private property. Now, what's going on here?"

"That’s what we were trying to find out," Kel said, looking at the two Mooresville employees.

VIII

Andre Jackson looked in his cash register with dismay. Hardly anything in the till. Business had been down since the bizarre incident with the intruder. At this

rate, he would soon have more gold in his fillings than in his account. He had seen more police and even some people he suspected were military. Whatever was going on, he hoped it would be over soon. He needed people not to be afraid of coming out at night for food and drink.

"Hey, Andre! Look at this."

A regular, one of the others who had been here that night, directed his attention to the television. It was a small old-fashioned black and white, mostly serving as background noise. Normally it wasn't turned on high enough to discern the words, so it just made a low buzz of almost heard conversation.

He looked up and instantly grabbed the remote control from under the register. There was a young Asian guy wearing some kind of costume that looked just like what had been in here. He and another man were

being led into a cop car while a reporter was firing questions. Andre turned up the volume.

"…mean this was just a publicity stunt?" the reporter was asking the two men.

"Yeah, that's right," the second guy, not the disguised one, said. "Arthur here is developing the latest game in the One Ship series. This is one of the characters slated to appear."

"But why?"

"You already know about the training exercises, Kel," the dressed up one, Arthur, told the reporter. "I thought if we could convince people there was a conspiracy, it'd generate sales."

"It was just a prank," the second man pleaded to the police officer.

"Trespassing isn't a prank," the officer replied. He opened the door and made the two get in the car. It

drove away, and Andre could see it was an Oakwood police car. Lagoda was too small to have a force of their own.

"Unbelievable," Kel muttered, before turning to face the cameraman. "This is Kel Jameson, reporting on an anonymous tip Oakwood Police and Oakwood News received earlier today. Now, the truth comes out. In what seems to be a bizarre marketing campaign, Mooresville gaming, or at least, some of its employees, have been faking a monster sighting to generate buzz around one of its upcoming games..."

Andre frowned at the television set. It was a perfectly logical explanation, he decided. It fits all the facts. It had been publicly, if not conveniently, exposed.

He didn't believe it for a moment.

Not for the first time, he regretted that neither he nor his regulars had thought to capture the initial

encounter on their phones. Sure, others had gotten pictures and brief snippets of video. But all of those were blurry, taken from a distance, and could have been anything.

They weren't what he had seen. They didn't involve interacting with, then fighting the creature. The people who'd gathered the 'evidence' hadn't seen the skin peel off and reveal something inhuman.

People still didn't know. Still thought he was crazy, deluded, or lying. It angered him, perhaps more than it should. Still...

What are you going to do about it? An inner voice asked.

Andre blinked. *What?*

What are you going to do about it? The voice repeated.

It was inside his head, like the inner voice of his own thoughts. And at the same time, it wasn't. It 'sounded' just slightly different. And yet, it wasn't unlike what he would be thinking under the circumstances. He felt like he needed to do something but didn't know what.

They're laughing at you, Andre. They think they've pulled a fine joke on you. Everyone's going to think you're a fraud. No, wait. Everyone's going to think you're stupid.

His hand gripped the bar, and his knuckles whitened.

"Man, who do they think we are?" his customer asked, glowering at the television. "Smug city people. Think we're just dumb hicks out here. What are we going to do, Andre?"

He looked up. Were they thinking the same thing? The regular drained his glass, slammed it down, and lumbered out the front door.

"I can't handle this," he growled as he left. "Stupid gamers."

Andre walked back to his kitchen. The voice in his head was quieter now, not using words. Still, he was dimly aware of being led to look around. He needed to find something. His eyes fell onto a meat cleaver lying on the table. Andre's mouth set in a grim line. Stupid gamers and their pranks, indeed.

The police car drove Arthur and Aaron back to Mooresville installation. After parking, the policeman led them into the main lobby. Keisha and Ellis were waiting.

"Thanks, Lynch," Keisha smiled. "We appreciate it."

"I'm still not sure I like this," the policeman told the younger woman. "All this to promote a game? The sightings and having me go to 'arrest' them?"

That's what Keisha had told the detective. Lynch still hadn't wanted to do it, but had been friends with her father, so did it as a favor for his sake.

"No such thing as bad publicity," Harlan grinned. "Don't worry; Mooresville gaming will make a donation to the Fraternal Order of Police for your trouble."

"Uh huh." Lynch shook his head. "Good night. Tell Ed I said hi, Keisha."

"I will. Good night."

They waited until Lynch drove away. Arthur pulled off the otherman shell, careful not to tear it. Fortunately, Ranyos was larger than him, and the skin, while dry, was still supple enough to wear over his regular clothes and move in.

Aaron let out a breath. "It actually...worked."

"So it seems," Harlan agreed. "What about Kel? Did he believe it?"

They had made two calls after making their plans. One to the police where they explained what they were doing, and one to Jameson, who had been left in the dark. The reporter's reaction had to be real. Of course, neither police nor news outlets knew there was an actual alien in the basement.

"I think so," Arthur said. "He likes the One Ship games and seemed genuinely upset." The programmer looked both amused and sheepish. "I guess he won't be buying any more games."

"As long as he's been thrown off the scent, it's just as well," Harlan said. "Now, we can get back to the real problem."

Ranyos.

"Yes?"

Ranyos spoke up, without thinking. The hailing came from a voice in his head, not an external source. He was in his cell, and the guard looked up and narrowed his eyes.

"Excuse me?"

Ranyos thought quickly. "Did you say something?"

"No."

"I'm sorry. I thought you did. Never mind."

The human grunted but didn't take his eyes off the otherman. Ranyos faced forward, his expression neutral and his gaze on nothing in particular. He was being contacted via a thought device. The device could be used to beam a sender's thought into the mind of a recipient or multiple recipients. It made for fast communication, undetectable to anyone who wasn't the

target. It could be used to absorb information far more quickly than conventional learning.

It could also be used to unbalance a mind, planting homicidal or suicidal thoughts into another. As a weapon, it had incited mass riots and killings in the ancient Thought War.

A Deceiver should be more careful, the voice in his head chided. That is, the voice coming into his head.

Forgive me, Kymeros, he answered by thinking. *I was caught off guard. It won't happen again.*

What is happening with the humans? Kymeros 'asked'.

They have taken me in, and are considering sending me home, Ranyos 'said'. *I'm not sure if they believe me about the Society yet. As of now, I see no evidence they are planning on returning to Garobus. Some defenses have been added here, but the humans remain cautious.*

I thought they might need further incentive. No matter. I have been working on that very thing. Fear not, Ranyos. Soon you will once again see Garobus and Ariadne.

IX

About half a dozen cars pulled into Mooresville's lot. As the sun set, Andre Jackson and other people from Lagoda got out of their vehicles and made for the front door. He still had his meat cleaver while several of the others had knives and even a few guns.

Andre wasn't sure how this whole thing had even gotten organized. He had walked outside with no plan, just anger. But then, about half a dozen others joined him. His regular had gotten a rifle and came back, too.

Very few words were exchanged. A few about Mooresville and 'showing them'. But there were no leadership roles taken, nor plans made. Everyone just

seemed to know what to do. They got in their cars and drove here. Now they were ready to break in and smash things up. He had a vague notion that they were just going to destroy the game lab, ostensibly what the 'prank' was about. He had another idea about actually hurting some of the programmers.

Still another part of him wondered what he was doing here, but his own thought was drowned out by the constant mental pressure in his head.

Andre pounded on the locked glass doors to the lobby. A security guard, or rather, an army reservist providing security detail, came forward. He was about to order them off and come back tomorrow when he saw most of them were armed. The guard swore and ducked behind the front desk as the Lagodans with guns aimed and began firing into the lobby.

From his vantage point, the guard hit a button under the lip of the desk. An ear-piercing alarm sounded, and an answering alarm came from the apartments / barracks. A few more soldiers ran out and approached the intruders. Andre raised his cleaver and charged.

Ross, Hailey, and Dressler were in the basement watching Somnus on the portal. Their ruse had paid off, and they were probably going to sleep before too much longer. The view of Somnus, while still interesting by virtue of what it was, remained unchanged.

Then, the alarm rang and a soldier ran in. "Sir! The building is under attack!"

"What?" Dressler turned form the alien view to confront the all too human emergency.

"Half a dozen rioters! Some of them have guns!"

"Lock down the basement immediately," Dressler barked. "Defend the civilians and keep an eye on the otherman."

As some of the rioters fought with the guards outside, others bashed in the glass with the butts of their rifles. They ran inside, jumped over the desk, and pushed through the double doors to the computer lab.

Arthur Takamori was in the lab alone, trying to catch up on some game programming. After the 'publicity stunt', he was making sure an otherman sprite was in the game play, in case Kel or anyone else came back before it was officially released. He was tired and just wanted to get back to Rachel.

Then, a group of strange men burst through the doors. Instantly, they began smashing computers. Arthur, who was at the other end of the large room, stood up and shouted in surprise. He quickly ducked

when he saw that at least two of them had guns. A shot rang overhead, and Arthur crawled to the back door. Someone shouted after him.

"It's the gamer! Get him!"

He pushed through the door, stood, and ran down the back hall to the elevators. All he could think about was getting away. He had to get back to Rachel and make sure she was all right. She, Ellis and Aaron had already retired for the night.

On the other hand, he thought, maybe it was better if they were chasing him than going to the apartments. He entered the elevator and slammed down the basement button. There were no stairs down. While a clear safety violation, the fact that the basement could only be reached by elevator was deliberate. This way, access to the underground secrets could be controlled. Any othermen, like Ranyos, would have to smash their

way through the concrete foundation to leave the building.

The doors opened and Arthur emerged in the hallway leading to the infirmary, intelligence offices, holding cell, and the gateway research center. Thinking quickly, he hit the emergency hold button on the side. Another safety precaution, it would lock down the elevators. Meant for containment, it would also keep the attackers above from following him down.

He ran down the hall just as Dressler, Ross and Hailey followed from the opposite direction.

"We're under attack!" Arthur called out.

"We know," Dressler said grimly.

"We can't go back upstairs," Arthur told them. "There are armed shooters in the hall above. I had to shut down the elevator."

"Good thinking," Dressler said, sincerely. "But unfortunately, that leaves us trapped down here."

"Why?" Hailey demanded. "Why this frenzy? I can see people being angry over the 'hoax.' but violence?"

"Frenzy," Arthur echoed. His mind whirled with speculation before his eyes widened with memory. "Sirs, the othermen can make people become suddenly violent. Remember the thought devices?"

"I sure do," Hailey said. He headed to the cell where Ranyos was still sitting. The others followed and all of them stood before the alien.

"You," Hailey began. "You said your people were considering an attack on Earth."

"Not my people," Ranyos corrected. "The Society. I told you, they cast me out. For all intents and purposes, I'm an Outlier now."

"Whatever. We have a group of madmen upstairs as we speak. I understand your, excuse me, the Society, had thought devices which can cause madness? Rage?"

"Yes," Ranyos confirmed. "So, Arachne is making her move. So soon."

"What can we do?" Ross asked. "How can we fight an enemy who can turn humans against humans?"

"Ask Arthur. He knows."

Arthur snapped his fingers. "Right. The ability isn't all powerful. Some people can resist. We can also run interference, like we can against a radio wave."

"Do you have the ability to do that down here?" Ross asked.

"Actually, yes. There are interference devices in the portal room," Arthur told them. "We worried at first the othermen would try to come through with thought devices in hand."

"Instead of landing elsewhere," Hailey said. "Come on, then."

He addressed the otherman. "Don't try to escape. We're not done here."

The humans ran back out, leaving Ranyos alone once more with the guard. He kept still, and his expression blank. An otherman face wasn't as expressive as a human's. Still, basic emotions could be seen and read if he allowed them to show.

I need to remain blackjack faced, he thought. *No, wait. Poker faced.*

Even after a few years, he still had a poor grasp of human idioms.

Outside, Andre dropped his cleaver and gripped his head. The thoughts which had been driving him forward suddenly drowned in a headache simultaneously clearing

and muddling his thinking. He hadn't imagined that was even possible.

He blinked and looked around. What was going on? Why was he even here? Back home, it had seemed so necessary, so right. Now, however, he felt like they had all been rash and foolish. They had just committed several felonies and needed to escape before someone called the police and arrested them.

He was just about to turn back to his car when the thoughts came back. They were stronger, more insistent, but simpler. Now they simply said to kill.

Crush. Kill. Destroy.

Arthur fumbled with and adjusted the interference knobs.

"I'm trying to run interference," he said to the men behind him. "But the other signal is getting stronger."

Dressler, Ross, and Hailey watched a monitor behind him. Not one of the portals, this was just connected to an outside security camera. On it, they saw the attackers stop for a moment and then resume fighting the army reserves. They moved more sluggishly but still pressed forward.

"Use the strongest signal you can," Hailey ordered. "Hurry!"

Arthur complied and turned the dial up as far as it would go. An audible high-pitched whine sounded, making the humans cover their ears. Arthur himself screamed and blacked out. The last thing he saw before he lost consciousness was the attackers also falling.

X

The reservists transferred the rioters to the infirmary. Dr. Rachel Takamori and her staff had been awakened by the fighting. They had wisely stayed put until the violence was over and then were summoned to care for their defenders and attackers.

Miraculously, no one had been killed, although several were injured. Worse, both the intruders and Arthur had all been knocked unconscious by the interference.

"The attackers, I understand," Rachel said when her husband was brought in. "But why Arthur?"

"He was operating the interference machine," Ellis Harlan answered. He and Rachel were now standing by a bed where Arthur lay. He was breathing, alive, but couldn't be roused back to consciousness.

"He was very brave, Rachel," Harlan said, consolingly. "And resourceful, as he always is."

She sighed deeply. "He always feels this need to prove himself. To show he can be tough as well as smart."

"He has you to protect," Harlan pointed out. "And your child. Did I congratulate you, by the way?"

"Yes, you did. And I've told him I don't need a protector. Just a partner."

"Well, as backward as it may seem to the more liberal, men are, by tradition, the protectors and providers, while women are the nurturers."

She gave him a look.

"Not that it should limit or be the sole definition. But traditions exist for a reason, Rachel. Be thankful Arthur is brave enough to fulfill it."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know. I'm no expert on men and women and relationships. I'm twice divorced and never was good at social skills. But

you and Arthur, you've built something beautiful. And you're going to pull through it. Both of you."

She sighed again and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Ellis. As Keisha says, there's always hope."

Keisha and Aaron were now in Ranyos' cell with their three superiors.

"How did the Society manage this attack?" Ross asked. "I thought your devices didn't have that long of a range."

"No," Aaron agreed. "The last time we were on Somnus, you used a thought device to make us fight each other. But you were also flying nearby."

"True," Ranyos agreed. "Its range is only a few miles. Certainly not across the void of space."

"Then another device is somewhere on Earth," Keisha said. "Probably in Lagoda."

They had, of course, checked their attackers for identification. All who had it on them were from there. The intelligence agents told Rachel and the other medical staff to treat them here on site. They weren't getting the police involved, nor were they going to take them to a public hospital. They had just gotten suspicion off them. Besides, they knew more about othermen than anyone else.

Dressler looked at Keisha. "We have some options. We can go back up to Lagoda and search for thought devices..."

"Or take my advice as an otherman," Ranyos interrupted.

Dressler glared at him but nodded. "I take it, you have a suggestion," the colonel remarked.

"To attack the problem at the source helps your people and mine."

"Perhaps," Hailey said. "What would you suggest?"

"Send a small force to Erebus," Ranyos suggested. "Don't confront them directly but have people in position."

"If you're suggesting a surprise attack, Ranyos, we know it wouldn't work," Aaron replied, shaking his head. "Arachne's eyes will see us right away."

"Her abilities are not infinite. Indeed, Erebus is almost as far as she can see from the hive. That's why the Outliers made their home beyond, in the abandoned city by the seabed."

"And the other city you found?" Ross asked.

"Mariamne. Further still."

"All right," Hailey said. "So, we put a squadron of men in Erebus. Then what?"

"I would suggest you go at night," Ranyos said. "Set up a camp and make bright lights to get her attention.

While she's looking there, I sneak away and head for Mariamne by way of the seabed. Then, I can rally the Outliers to launch a sneak attack."

"And why should we trust you?" Hailey asked.

"You still doubt? Very well, send one of your people with me. To ensure my cooperation."

"I'll go, sirs," Aaron spoke up. As an historian, he felt naturally curious about this new city on Somnus. To glean more information about the othermen's time Before was something he wouldn't want to miss.

"Besides," he continued. "I've had more contact with them than anyone else, except maybe Ellis. And he'll need to stay here and tend the gateways."

"Right," Hailey agreed. "On the technical side of this operation, Harlan and Takamori are our greatest assets. Let's hope we can get him back in action soon."

"We can move a squad of troops through the gate with grenades and grenade launchers," Dressler remarked. "We know heavier weapons will kill othermen. Unfortunately, there isn't a portal big enough for a tank or vehicles, is there?"

"No," Aaron confirmed. "Last time, we took a boat and makeshift structures through in pieces."

"We don't have that luxury now," Hailey said. "They'll never just sit back and let us put together war equipment. We'll just have to get our people to try and build a larger gateway outside."

"In the meantime, who's to lead the troops to Somnus?" Dressler asked. He looked at Keisha. "I'm senior officer here, but Thomas has more knowledge of the terrain."

"I would suggest you go back with your men, sir," she replied. When the colonel raised his eyebrows, she explained.

"Your men are already used to your command. Plus, you won't be moving around much beyond Erebus. In the meantime, I can lead my people back to Lagoda, which I'm also familiar with, to begin searching for a thought device."

Ross nodded. "I can help supervise, while Hailey assists Dressler. Aaron and Ranyos can go over as well and hopefully reach the Outliers. Let's try to be ready in the next twenty-four hours. Since we don't know our opponent's position or timetable, we'll have to move fast. Dismissed."

XI

Dressler, Aaron and Ranyos faced the gateway. Night had fallen on Somnus; they could see a clear night sky with constellations identical to Earth's, except mirrored in reverse. Somnus had no moons, but Phaeton was in the sky, appearing as a bright star. Overall, it was dark, though not as dark as they had hoped.

The three were dressed in army fatigues, even their otherman guest. Behind them, about twenty other soldiers were dressed the same. The idea was to go in, heads down. Aaron and Ranyos studied the view for a moment and then stepped back into the line.

The orders were no one would talk to or try to look at the otherman and historian. Instead, they would march in, turn on their flashlights, and begin to build camp. The other soldiers had backpacks and tents as if it were another training drill. Then the pair would slip quietly away.

Dressler marched forward, entering the gate. The others followed in two columns. The gate was wide enough to allow this, but not much more. Once again, there was no unusual sensation of any kind. But with a few steps, the group travelled light years away from earth to stand underneath the warm night sky of Somnus.

Such an extraordinary event, quiet as it might have been, wasn't lost on the humans. Several of them craned their necks and others chattered excitedly. One even bent down and picked up a clod of alien soil, wanting to see if it felt any differently from the Earth equivalent.

The men milled about slowly, only gradually spreading out. As previously discussed, Aaron and Ranyos casually began walking to the west, and the open seabed. Behind them, Dressler waited about five minutes and then began barking orders.

"All right, fall in! No more sightseeing. Get some light. Start making camp. Remember, we're on a mission."

Behind the retreating pair, lights began to come on. Some held flashlights while others dropped their backpacks to get their tents. The men knew their job and, to their credit, didn't allow even the wonder and fear of being on another planet break their discipline.

Aaron refrained from looking back. He and Ranyos kept a steady, though not hurried pace. Heads still down, they would not even venture talking to one another until they reached the seabed. Just that journey would take several hours, but everyone had rested for about six hours prior to the crossing. Fortunately, the men's supplies and weapons had already been in good order, so they hadn't had to spend an inordinate amount of time packing.

Aaron himself also had a pack, but a smaller one since it was expected he and his companion would need to walk for several days. He had no tent since Ranyos had assured him the recent weather had been pleasant. He only had a sleeping bag, rain gear, water, and some ready-to-eat provisions. He had been asked if he wanted a weapon, but he declined. If Ranyos found it, there was the chance he would try to hurt or even kill Aaron.

Granted, that could happen anyway. Aaron remembered Ranyos' conduct years ago. The otherman had initially presented himself as a loyal drone to the Society and queen. Then, he had shown himself loyal to the Outliers. Who knew where his loyalties and plans went now? It could well be Ranyos was everything he claimed to be. After all, he had suffered since then. The loss of his wings was real enough. Then again, there could still be some unknown factor at work.

They walked for several hours in the dead of night. Eventually, they reached a place where the terrain changed to sand. Aaron recognized this as the dried seabed where the Outliers originally lived. Although it would still be several days before they reached their home, this was just out of range of Arachne's artificial sight. He turned to Ranyos and ventured to speak.

"Well, we've made it so far," he remarked, stating the obvious. Still, the awkward conversation had to start somewhere.

"Yes," Ranyos agreed. "And since Arachne hasn't sent anyone after us yet, it is safe to say she didn't see us."

"You're sure? What if she has ruses of her own?"

"She typically doesn't think that way," Ranyos said. "And none of the others are as well-trained Deceivers as

I. They saw such thinking the same way they saw the preserved artifacts of Before."

"What way?"

Ranyos shrugged. "As relics of the past. If not dangerous, then at least things with no modern application."

"Yet, they were clever enough to pretend to be mere animals when we first came to Somnus," Aaron remarked. "So they could study us up close and discern our motives."

"A simple trick," Ranyos dismissed. "Even that was the cleverest and most innovative thing othermen had done for countless ages. It was I who advised and planned the real Deceiver work."

A trace of smugness entered Ranyos' voice and face. It was quickly replaced by bitterness. "And all I wanted was to move our planet forward. To reintegrate

the Outliers into the Society and use their uniqueness. And for my efforts, I was mutilated and abandoned."

Aaron studied the otherman. Not sure how to answer him, he decided it was best to change the subject. He looked up at the night sky and pointed to the brightest object. Ranyos' gaze followed.

"We didn't know until after we returned to Earth the first time there was another planet in your solar system."

Ranyos nodded. "And a few clusters of asteroids and comets. The gravity of Eurobus sometimes pulls them into the orbit of Garobus. As you learned from the Pilot, we've had occasional danger from collisions."

"Is that what you call your world?" Aaron asked. "We've always just called it Somnus. The other planet we named Phaeton."

"They were named Before," Ranyos said with a nod. "I believe Garobus means 'home land.' Eurobus, then

meant 'far land.' I'm not exactly sure. The Pilot doesn't like to speak of Before, but we know there were multiple factions, or nations as you call them, before the Society. Probably other languages as well and other histories. But they are long lost, unless the Pilot remembers."

"Our names for worlds came from the past as well," Aaron said. "We're still divided into nations. We also remember older nations died out. One of them, the ancient Greeks, gave us parts of our language, early science and early legends."

Aaron spread out his hands to encompass the stars. "The ancient Greeks, particularly the philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato, believed the Earth was the center of the universe, and their gods moved the planets and stars around it."

"Your world, your people at the center of the universe?" Ranyos echoed. "Even gods move about it?"

He chuckled mirthlessly. "How good for you. How flattering. Still, perhaps the othermen Before were no better. Who can say?"

Aaron sat down. Pulling out a flashlight, he checked his supplies. He grabbed his sleeping bag and a blanket. Rolling out the bag, he glanced at Ranyos.

"It is probably good to try and sleep a few hours," he suggested. "I don't have a second sleeping bag but do have an extra blanket."

"Thank you, but I won't need it," Ranyos assured him. "It won't get too cold tonight, and the sand is soft enough for me."

He looked around and then settled down on the former beach. "I am hoping to reach the Scavengers in another day or so. From there, it will be on to Mariamne."

XII

The sun came up on Erebus, and Dressler had the evening sentries rouse the others. Overnight, they had taken turns watching the camp, waiting for any sign of othermen. They already knew there were no dangerous animals in the area. Furthermore, four years of observing this spot had reassured the humans they were entering a pleasant enough season.

If only the other circumstances were, Dressler thought. He watched as the red sun rose over the horizon, slowly illuminating the campground. Looking around, the colonel could see they were at the bottom of a crater. That wasn't a surprise; Adams' earlier account mentioned a disintegration bomb. The othermen had tried to destroy the Mooresville installation. After they had captured or killed the first human explorers on

Somnus, they wanted to discourage further parties of humans invading. As he recalled, it had been none other than Arthur Takamori who had sent the bomb back, where it had exploded here, removing all traces of the original Erebus camp.

Now, however, there was no pretense of building or maintaining a permanent base. Dressler's orders were simply to draw attention to themselves until reinforcements came. Whether said backing would be from Earth or somewhere on Somnus remained to be seen.

"All present and accounted for, sir," his subordinate informed him with a salute. The colonel looked up, nodded and walked over to where his soldiers stood at attention.

Dressler inspected them and ordered morning calisthenics. They would start the day by moving around

and making noise. A brisk lap or two around the crater's perimeter, and then they would make breakfast. If all the activity didn't let the Society know they were here, he would find something that did.

Ranyos and Aaron had also awakened at dawn. The otherman had shed his disguise by then, and Aaron packed it up with his sleeping bag. They began hiking northeast, in the general direction of the Outlier's former city. While they didn't have a compass, Aaron knew the general way. Ranyos knew the terrain even better, and the seabed was level enough to spot the city or any other break in the monotony.

Aaron munched on a nutrition bar and washed it down with water from his canteen. He had offered his unlikely companion another bar, but Ranyos had declined. Although othermen biology was similar

enough to humans’ to allow eating Earth food, Ranyos informed him he found it distasteful.

About midmorning, Ranyos stopped Aaron. He got on his hands and knees and began to poke through the sand. How he knew where to look, Aaron couldn't say. The otherman's shuffling and sniffing around reminded him of when the othermen first pretended to be animals to throw the humans off. Indeed, the illusion was convincing. Aaron, however, kept reminding himself that Ranyos was a Deceiver, and while perhaps not an enemy, was also not a friend.

The otherman found several fat grub-like creatures buried in the sand. He chewed and slurped them down with relish. Aaron offered him a canteen of water, which Ranyos did accept.

"You can keep it," Aaron told him.

When finished, Ranyos stood back up and looked around.

"We should be nearing the Scavengers' camp," he told Aaron.

"Can we avoid it?" the human asked.

"No, we want to meet up with them," Ranyos replied. "They can carry us over this terrain far more quickly than we can hike through it."

"Last time I saw them, they tried to kill me," Aaron remembered with a shudder.

"Because, in order to be helped by them, you must become one of them. As I have."

"How do I do that?"

"Feasting with them is usually the easiest way. Or saving their lives."

Aaron didn't look forward to a meal with the Scavengers. He remembered watching them cannibalize

their dead. Presumably, they ate other things as well, but eating one of those slimy creatures Ranyos had had for breakfast didn't appeal to him either.

Nevertheless, they kept up their journey until the red sun was almost directly overhead. While not overly hot, Aaron still felt its ancient rays beat down on him. He would have welcomed some shelter to hide from the sun and take a nap.

"Halt," Ranyos ordered. Aaron complied, and Ranyos pointed to several specks on the horizon.

"The Scavengers come," Ranyos continued. "Stand still. Don't threaten them."

"Don't worry," Aaron said, nervously.

As the specks in the horizon quickly grew in size, Aaron wondered how he had gotten here. A few weeks ago, he had been sipping a beer in the nation's capital. And before that, he'd been wondering if there was going

to be any further contact with the othermen. Now, he was under a red sun in the middle of a dead alien ocean, watching the fast movements of approaching alien giants.

How do these things happen?

Due to their size, the Scavengers indeed covered ground far more quickly than he ever could. Soon, half a dozen of them towered over Aaron and Ranyos. They stood over twelve feet tall and possessed muscular physiques. They had wings but couldn't fly due to their weight.

While they otherwise resembled baseline othermen, they differed a great deal mentally. The Scavengers were the result of genetic experimentation from Before. Their size and aggression were caused by increased growth hormones, along with an enhanced amygdala. They also had substandard intelligence, their own

customs, and had never been part of either the Society or the main Outliers.

The lead Scavenger looked at the intruders to their territory. He snorted and glowered at them.

"I crush. I kill."

"No crush," Ranyos answered. "No kill. I Ranyos. I brother."

"Ranyos? Brother?"

The Scavenger hesitated, and Aaron gaped in surprise and fascination. Although his speech was broken, the Scavenger had spoken far more than Aaron had ever heard before. Evidently, this was a sage among Scavengers. He hoped it would make a difference.

The Scavenger bent down and sniffed Ranyos. His brow furrowed in concentration. Then he roared and scooped up the otherman in a bear hug.

"Ranyos! Brother!"

"Brother!" Some of the others repeated the cry. Others, however, merely grunted and growled happily.

"What he?" the lead Scavenger asked, pointing to Aaron.

"He be brother," Ranyos told him. "Make brother."

The oversized head leaned in close. Aaron tried to relax and not show any fear or unease as he was sniffed in turn. Then sniffed again. Then again.

The sage couldn't make out what he was, it would seem. Finally, he turned once more to Ranyos. "What he? Outlie?"

"Far Outlier," Ranyos explained. He stretched his arms out to the sky. "Not from Garobus. Far away."

"You home Eurbus?"

Aaron noted the Scavenger had a hard time saying words with more than two syllables. Hence "Outlie' not 'Outlier', and 'Eurbus' not 'Eurobus'.

"No, I'm not from Eurobus, which my people call Phaeton," he began.

He stopped at the Scavenger's uncomprehending face. Ranyos smirked and shook his head.

Well, Aaron thought. *When on Somnus...*

"I Aaron. Home Earth."

That seemed clearer. "Aaron? Urff?"

"Earth. Aaron. You name?"

"No name."

"Most of the Scavengers don't have names," Ranyos explained.

"Well, I need to call him something," Aaron argued. He turned back to the Scavenger. "I name you. You Sage."

Ranyos put a hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh. But the Scavenger seemed receptive. Even intrigued.

"I Sage?"

"You Sage," Aaron nodded. "Yes."

Sage turned to the others. "I Sage!"

They howled and grunted with approval.

"This is all very well," Ranyos interrupted, turning serious again. "But we need to move."

He looked up. "Sage, take Ranyos? Take Aaron? To Merry?"

Aaron realized he meant Mariamne.

Sage nodded "We take. But Merry far. You stay night. Make Aaron brother."

Ranyos nodded and Sage scooped up Aaron. Another Scavenger did the same for Ranyos. They began to run over the dry seabed. Aaron felt disoriented and a little nauseated. But he couldn't deny the ground covered was far greater than they could do on their own. What the Scavengers lacked in intelligence they

more than made up for in strength, speed and endurance.

For the entire afternoon, they ran to the northeast. At one point, Aaron noted mountains and ruins off to the right. He told Ranyos they looked familiar.

"Yes, that is where the Outliers used to live," Ranyos confirmed. "We won't need to stay there, however. All of them have moved on to Mariamne."

The Scavengers stopped at a stream for a water break. Aaron ate another provision from his pack and filled his own canteen. By evening, they reached the Scavengers' home. Aaron could see first-hand evidence it was once an island.

An elevated hill with the same mound-like ruins greeted him. Even the hive where the Society lived wasn't entirely different. Furthermore, at the edge of the mountain was something else.

A ship.

Or rather, the rusted, corroded metal remains of one. Aaron had no trouble recognizing it, for while its markings were entirely alien, the basic shape was the same as a boat of similar size on Earth. He supposed the oceans on Somnus must be very similar to Earth's as well.

A large hole pierced the ancient vessel hull, and Sage took them inside. Within were close to thirty Scavengers. Some were fighting amongst themselves, others were sleeping on the ground, and some were tending a fire in the middle. Aaron craned his head and saw that a couple large holes had been punched in the ceiling, to let the smoke out.

"Ranyos, brother," Sage began. "Aaron, far Outlie. From Earth."

The other Scavengers congregated around the fire to look at the newcomers. Sage stood proudly.

"I Sage! I get name. Aaron give name. Make Aaron brother."

Another Scavenger nodded. "We get food."

As it turned out, there were no fresh bones to pick. But the Scavengers kept a few special cured strips of Otherman meat in case the need arose. Sage took one from the fire keepers and gingerly handed it to Aaron.

Aaron smiled sheepishly at their expectant gazes. Then, he took a bite of the dry, rancid, pungent meat. It was just a small bite and took a long time to chew. But finally, he managed to choke it down to the delight of the crowd.

"Aaron eat dead!" Sage exclaimed. "Dead in him. Dead in us. Brother!"

"Brother!" the others cheered.

Thankfully, he wasn't expected to eat the entire strip, which was taken back and replaced with different food and water. None of it was what he would call tasty. Still, it was better than eating otherman.

The Scavengers fed him until he could eat no more. Then the festivities concluded. The Scavengers went back about their business, apparently having lost interest. The red sun was beginning to set, and Ranyos suggested they retire for the evening.

"We still have a ways to go," he told Aaron. "Even with Sage to help us."

Aaron agreed, tired anyway. There were no beds or cushions. The Scavengers who were asleep simply curled up on the floor wherever they happened to be. To prevent being inadvertently trampled in the night, Aaron set up his sleeping bag against the wall, not too far from the open hole.

It wasn't comfortable, and Aaron kept waking up and falling back to sleep. Once, however, he awakened and peered outside. It was night, and the stars were out. Phaeton was slightly larger; over the next few days, it would pass as close as its orbit would take it to Somnus. It should make for an unforgettable sight.

Tonight, however, there was another interesting thing. Aaron saw Sage outside. The giant otherman was looking skyward. Aaron thought he saw a look of curiosity and wonder, not at all keeping with the Scavengers and their brutish ways. He wondered if there were other giants like Sage, or if was only him. Was this something Sage regularly did? Or had the presence of Aaron awakened a latent curiosity? A new questioning of ideals? It certainly had for humans, he thought as he drifted back to sleep. And he had the

feeling he'd get even more questions before he had answers.

XIII

The next day came and Colonel Dressler had his men set up targets for practice. They shot with their rifles and chucked grenades into the crater's edges. While he wasn't about to use up all his ammunition, they hadn't apparently caught the attention of the Society yet. Hopefully that would soon change.

It was after lunch before one of his men ran up to him with binoculars.

"Colonel, look!"

Dressler took the offered binoculars and scanned the clear sky to the east. Sure enough, he caught sight of a speck on the horizon. At first, he thought it might be one of the othermen, but as it got closer, he could see more details.

For one thing, it had no wings. Instead, energy trails shot out of its feet. While roughly otherman shaped, it was cased in black and white paneling with a power pack built into its lower chest. When it reached them, and landed on its feet, Dressler noted the face. Four glowing lights for eyes and a circular speaker for a mouth made him realize this was a robot. And from the accounts of the last visit to Somnus, Dressler knew what it must be.

"I'm Colonel Dressler, United States Army," he said, standing at attention. "Are you the one called the Pilot?"

"I am," the robot said in a masculine, synthetic voice. "While I have encountered humans before, you and your party are new to me. Why have you come back here, to that which you call Somnus, but we call Garobus?"

According to his own account, the Pilot had been created Before. Not only predating the Society, the Pilot had also been built decades before the Thought War. He had been made to pilot a spaceship containing explosives. His mission had been to destroy a large asteroid on a collision course with the planet.

He had succeeded, but something else had happened. Lights had appeared in the sky, and when they touched the Pilot, they had somehow given him sentience. What the lights were, the othermen couldn't say. They had appeared more than once, rarely and unpredictably. To some, it was merely a natural force.

To others, it was a god.

Right now, however, Dressler wasn't concerned with the Pilot's past or origin. He only wanted answers to what had happened on Earth. So, he came straight to the point.

"For four of our years, we have had no contact with you," Dressler told the Pilot. "Then, a few weeks ago, an otherman appeared near our base."

"How can that be so?" the Pilot asked. Dressler thought he heard genuine surprise in his voice but couldn't be sure. The Pilot was a machine, and whether sentient or not, didn't sound like a man or even an otherman. Moreover, the robot had no moving parts on his face. No blinking eyes or moving mouth, nor any real body language that could have given a clue as to whether he was truthful.

"Can you confirm no one could have come from the Society?"

"No, Colonel Dressler. The Society has sent no one. We want nothing to do with you. The only other factions are the Outliers and Scavengers. Both groups are even more primitive than we. I assure you; they don't have

anything approaching your abilities, even if they did have the desire."

"Now, that's very interesting," Dressler replied, with just the faintest trace of irony. "We managed to capture the otherman. It turns out he claims to know you. He calls himself Ranyos."

"Ranyos?!"

This time, the shock in the Pilot’s voice was unmistakable. "Colonel, Ranyos is a fugitive. An exile, for treason."

"We know. He told us. And he showed how you burned off his wings."

"Yes. That's correct," the Pilot confirmed. "Ranyos. But I don't understand. How could he have possibly travelled to Earth?"

"He claims he snuck back into the Society and found a gate there."

"But we have no gateway," the Pilot protested. "As for Ranyos, we haven't even seen him since his punishment."

"Yet, he sits in a prison back on Earth."

The last part was a lie, of course. He just wanted to see how the Pilot reacted. The robot didn't seem to know where Ranyos was and evidently hadn't seen him sneak back with Aaron. Still, it didn't explain how Ranyos had travelled in the first place, if his story wasn't true. Right now, Dressler didn't know which one, if either had told him the truth.

"You know we have him, because we know what you did to him," Dressler pressed when the Pilot didn't answer. "How else could we have known?"

"I tell you, we have no gateway."

"And by your own admission, the only other groups on this planet couldn't possibly have one either. I know

you took the information on portal construction the last time we met. If our roles were reversed, wouldn't you think we developed gates of our own?"

"I do understand their workings," the Pilot confessed. "But we have no technology except for a few artifacts from Before. There are no factories anymore, no programmers, and no engineers."

"There's you. You could custom make such a device, even without infrastructure."

"But not without materials. The only thing I was able to make was an interference field, to keep anyone from teleporting into the hive."

"I'm not inclined to simply take your word," Dressler said. "I don't suppose you would be willing to show us your hive? Provide proof of what you say?"

"I doubt the queen would allow that. Especially given your armaments. I don't understand how Ranyos

ended up with you. But I also don't understand your show of hostility. An armed squadron? War games? Why this show of force over one renegade otherman?"

"Because there's more than one renegade," Dressler said, his eyes narrowing. "We were attacked by a group of people who came from the town Ranyos appeared in. They were under the control of a thought device. We know because the interference we ran stopped the attack. Just like last time."

"Impossible! How could that possibly be true?" the Pilot protested.

"You tell me," Dressler answered, folding his arms.

"I must return to Arachne," the Pilot said. "None of this makes any sense. I tell you, Colonel Dressler, no such activity was authorized by, much less carried out, by the Society."

"We'll wait for now," Dressler agreed. "Confer with your superiors and return with your answer. We're not eager to start a fight. But know that we have the capability to do so if answers aren't given and steps conducive to peace aren’t taken."

The Pilot nodded and flew away without another word. Dressler watched him go, fully aware that Ross and Hailey would have been watching back on Earth via the gateway. He found himself regretting that Aaron and Ranyos went off alone. It would have been better to have the Pilot and otherman face one another. Maybe then, he could figure out who was telling the truth.

XIV

Keisha Thomas had been searching through Lagoda all day. While they had tried to be discreet, it was almost

impossible to be unseen. Especially since so many private citizens had been missed by now.

While most of the Lagodans had shied away from the soldiers, a few of the bolder ones had approached her, wanting to know where their neighbors went. Figuring that it was best to tell the truth, at least partially, she said they had attacked and tried to break into Mooresville gaming.

They were now in custody, and she wasn’t at liberty to say more. All that was true enough; she hoped she hadn't fed any more into the conspiracy theorists' speculations.

They were searching the row of houses where they found Ranyos. Or rather, where the otherman had allowed himself to be found. Interestingly enough, they found the frozen body of a homeless man in a ditch nearly the same size as their off-world guest. Keisha

figured that's where Ranyos had gotten the trench coat when he first wandered into the cafe. Whether he had killed the man or simply found the body of someone who died of hypothermia, Keisha couldn't say. Maybe she didn't want to know.

She walked into the house next to where Ranyos had been discovered. In the living room was a dry rotted couch and several loose boards. She and the men with her looked through the other rooms.

Next, they went to the basement. Carefully navigating down the rickety stairs, they found themselves in a moldy, foul-smelling place none of them wanted to stay in for long. Why hadn’t these buildings just been torn down years ago?

Then, she heard it. A faint humming sound, not unlike a generator. They looked at each other, and Keisha walked around the stairs to see the crawl space

underneath the steps had been bricked up. She reached out to the wall, and gently prodded.

The bricks fell, making her jump back. They had just been put there, not mortared in place. Recently, too, for there in the crawl space, Keisha found what she was looking for.

Another gateway hummed with activity. Clearly not one of theirs, it was composed of a black iron alloy, appeared clunkier, and had extra antennae and controls she wasn't familiar with. It was, of course, activated, which was why they heard the humming.

Oddly enough, however, the image was not anywhere on Somnus that Keisha had seen before.

She knew this because the sky was dark, not the darkness of nightfall, but the darkness of outer space. A darkness which came from no atmosphere. A barren,

cratered landscape stretched out to the horizon, reminding her of pictures of the moon landing.

On the horizon, there was a small disk. Blue green, it was no bigger than a full moon on Earth.

It was, she was almost certain, Somnus as viewed from space.

"I think so, too," Ross agreed when Keisha brought the alien gateway back to Mooresville.

Keisha and her men had carefully removed it from Lagoda, and she had even had some of the men keep their guns trained on it. But nothing appeared on the monitor, and neither did anything try to come through. It made for a tense but uneventful drive.

"That would make this area Phaeton," Hailey said. "Which just opens up a lot more questions."

"Well, for one thing, Ranyos obviously lied about coming from a gateway in the Society," Ross said.

"Are we sure?" Keisha asked. "I mean, if he came from Phaeton, it means he first had to go there from the surface of Somnus."

"Then from Phaeton, he came to Earth?" Ross replied. "That's a lot of travel when it would be easier to just come here from his home planet."

"We need to look for the simplest explanation," Harlan remarked, looking over the new gateway. "Occam's Razor and what not."

"Occam's Razor is just a tool to prevent over thinking," Hailey remarked irritably. "A human one, at that. It's not a set law of nature or a prediction of an alien mind."

"But why put a gateway tied to Phaeton at all?" Keisha asked. "It looks as dead as the moon. Yes, we

know they had space travel ages ago. Millennia, probably, eons possibly. Still, they couldn't possibly have a base there now. Could they?"

"Going on the whole Occam's Razor though," Harlan said. What if we're over thinking and Somnus is where Ranyos came from? Maybe this view of Phaeton is a glitch; maybe the signal isn't as strong and can't lock onto one place as well."

"Do you see any evidence in the circuits?" Ross asked.

"Possibly. The othermen may have reverse engineered the portal but haven't perfectly replicated it. This is obviously a different design."

He stood and regarded the device before continuing. "I recognize a few of the pathways already but would need more time to examine it in detail. And I'm still working on making a larger portal for our use as it is."

“How’s that going?” Ross asked.

“It’s at least as difficult, but for a different reason. There, I know how to enlarge the existing design. But powering it is another matter.”

“Well, keep it up,” Ross told him. “We watched Dressler make contact with the Pilot. And while we don’t want to, we may well need to send a tank or truck.”

“I could use Arthur now,” Harlan remarked to no one in particular as he left the room.

“No…no…don’t…”

Arthur muttered the words so quietly that no one would have heard them if Rachel hadn’t been sitting at his side. She was off duty but had spent most of her evenings by her husband’s bedside. Neither he nor any of the Lagodans had awakened from the coma, and her

worry had just increased, along with her sense of powerlessness.

She ran her fingers through his hair, kissed him, and whispered in his ear that she loved him. And yes, she needed him. Even if they didn't have a child on the way, but especially so now.

Even unconsciousness didn't seem to give him any peace.

She didn't know what to think about God since the discovery of the othermen. The Bible acted as if man's place in the universe was unique. Creator, creation and nothing else mentioned. But how would othermen fit into such a worldview?

"Lewis argued decades ago it can be interpreted either way," Aaron had once said. "If the universe is teeming with life, believers will say it points to an active God, while nonbelievers will say it points to life simply

being a common byproduct of the universe. On the other hand, if no one else is out there, believers will say it proves life couldn't have happened without God. Nonbelievers will say it proves we were a fluke or accident."

"Well, we've discovered the othermen, so part of Lewis' thought seems dated now," she had replied.

"The point is, whatever facts we find, people will simply explain it in the context of their *a prioi* worldview. I don't think it will actively change many minds. Besides, even the Bible mentions aliens of a sort. Angels, cherubim, seraphim, living creatures. No, they're not grey aliens in flying saucers…"

"Neither are the othermen."

"But they are 'aliens' in the sense that they are intelligent beings who aren't human. If there are still

more beings out there, they'll probably be nothing like our science fiction or urban legends either."

Rachel bowed her head in prayer now. For herself, for Arthur, and for them all.

XV

Outside the Mooresville compound, Ellis Harlan and his team had set up their large gateway. It stood twenty feet wide, as many feet tall, and was powered by two additional generators brought in for that purpose. Harlan knew what they were doing would put a drain on their electricity, so he hoped two more would be enough.

In the field, he noted two tanks which had arrived. While they weren't going to try and send them to Somnus now, the army equipment was on standby, waiting for the moment when or if they would be needed. They were running drills now, and Ellis found himself remembering an old video game he had played as a kid.

Now, here he was, working for a video game company serving as a cover for a government research center for teleportation. Who would have thought they would all end up here? Of course, he himself didn't do much work with the video games. Arthur was more the bridge between the cover and the real work.

Harlan hoped and prayed for his colleague, former student and current friend. And for Rachel too. Especially with a baby on the way. But come what may, they had no choice but to continue with all their work. Even the latest One Ship game had been released to keep up their cover.

Hopefully, that would throw any nosy outsiders off the trail.

The gateway activated and Ellis saw the largest portal he had yet attempted start to form. At first there was just distortion, like smoky mist. Then, Somnus came

into view. As always, it was the Erebus site; he saw Dressler's men and a campsite in the background. The gateways were one way; a gateway would have to be provided to get the soldiers home. Until then, they were effectively stranded.

Harlan heard several pops on the portal. It was using too much power, even with two backup generators. The soldiers practicing their drills began to point and shout in dismay, but it made no difference. The portal shut down.

"We will have to send a smaller portal through," Harlan told them. "If they need to retreat, then they can. It's the best I can do."

"What are they up to, Pilot?"

On Somnus, miles away from Erebus, stood the hive. An immense artificial mountain-like structure, it

resembled the mound of a termite colony more than it resembled anything else on Earth. Appropriate that the home of the Society would appear thus. For they were a colony of millions of workers, sterile females who carried out the cooking, cleaning, construction work and childcare. There were also several hundred thousand drones, males who did the hunting and, when necessary, fighting.

Over them all was one queen. One fertile female who produced eggs for the next generation. Arachne was the current queen and the one who had posed the question to the Pilot.

“I’m not sure,” the Pilot answered. “Were I to venture a guess, I would say they were trying to send more of their forces here.”

The two were standing on top of the hive to get a better look at what was happening. A gateway appeared

in the midst of the human camp and the aliens were inspecting it. The Pilot could see far away being artificial. The queen could do so because she had a device from Before.

The Pilot regarded her. Like the othermen workers in form, she mainly differed in size and distended abdomen. Moreover, her eyes were artificial implants, mirrored panels that focused like both a camera and telescope. The Pilot had surgically implanted them into her skull, as he had all the previous queens. Once, in the time Before, the ocular implants had been grafted into spies of warring nations. But now, the Society was the only real nation, and the queens used them as tools to oversee their domain. The devices had, for a time, been largely ceremonial.

Then the humans came.

“But why now?” Arachne wondered aloud. “They haven’t been here in years. Why do they now come back to Garobus, and more aggressively at that?”

“They claim they were attacked by a thought device on their own Earth,” the Pilot told her. “Even more curious, they say Ranyos somehow made it to their world.”

“Ranyos,” she growled, and the Pilot could hear the anger, hurt and betrayal in her voice. Once, years ago, Ranyos had been her favorite drone. She had loved him, and he believed Ranyos had felt the same way.

Then, Ranyos changed. After a nearly fatal encounter with the Scavengers, he had been rescued by the Outliers. Following that, Ranyos had begun expressing strange thoughts to his queen.

He had come to believe the Society had grown stagnant. He wanted to welcome Outliers back and work

together to learn and build new things. To, essentially, return the othermen to what they had been like Before.

Both Arachne and the Pilot had tried to convince him of the folly of such thinking. The Pilot was old enough to remember Before. While he recognized the value of individuals and innovation, he also knew such things, taken to excess, also bred ambition, greed, corruption, and finally violence.

To exalt the self was to put the self on a higher pedestal than the group. Such thinking was anathema to peace. What good would more knowledge, greater achievement, or ‘glory’ be if it destroyed peace?

Besides, he had knowledge of Before. And he continued to gather more data. Astronomical, ecological and meteorological. He offered to appease Ranyos by imparting some of his knowledge via the thought device he had. But such a proposal didn’t satisfy the otherman

drone. He wanted to do something, to experience something. He didn’t want to be fed the knowledge of what he didn’t experience himself.

Ranyos and Arachne slowly drifted apart. Arachne mated more often with other drones and, the Pilot later learned, Ranyos had developed feelings for an Outlier, one who was like the females from Before. But for all that, Ranyos had remained outwardly loyal, even when the first humans came.

“Ranyos tried to pit us against them,” Arachne remembered. “He wanted us to bring each other down so he could lead the Outliers to supremacy.”

“When we discovered his plan, you clipped his wings and exiled him,” the Pilot recalled.

“Now he’s back and must be trying to do the same thing again,” Arachne said. “But how? How could he

have a thought device, let alone a gateway? We have done nothing to the humans."

"How indeed?" the Pilot mused.

"Has he found new allies?" she wondered. "How else could he have done all this?"

"The Society's early years involved demolishing and dismantling cities and technology that survived the Thought War," the Pilot said. "However, after a few decades, this work gradually trailed off. The early queens became more interested in building the future than destroying the past."

"It would seem something was overlooked," she decided.

She took the stairs down to her audience chamber. It couldn't properly be called a throne room because it had no ornamentation. The queen simply sat on the polished floor when not in the egg chambers laying another

clutch. Off to the side was an open door leading to the Pilot's rooms. This was where the Pilot stored all their Before artifacts. Moreover, he was a wealth of knowledge in his own right. He occupied an important, albeit background position.

For the Pilot had never, in all his long existence, had any desire to rule over the othermen. He had been built originally to rescue Garobus from a potentially devastating asteroid collision.

Even after being given sentience by the mysterious lights, he still found himself driven by the words of his original programmer.

Life is precious and must be saved.

The Pilot watched as Arachne conferred with her drones. "Philos, I want you and the Pilot to return to the human encampment," she instructed the male who had replaced Ranyos as her favorite. "If they won't believe

our innocence, then they may at least appreciate our own show of strength. No, do not attack. Merely show them we, too, have our soldiers."

"And what of us?" another drone, Cephus, asked.

"A second group of you need to search where we left Ranyos," she said. "Look for anything that resembles a ruin or machine from Before. We have to know what he can or can't do. The rest of us will remain here and protect the Society. At all costs, it must be preserved."

XVI

Carried by the Scavengers, Aaron and Ranyos found themselves approaching Mariamne. It had once been an island as well. Thus, it seemed to be perched on a high hill rising from the dry seabed. It reminded Aaron of the Outliers' previous city, but larger and better preserved.

Indeed, it seemed almost to glow.

As they approached, they came upon a large field of moss-like growth. Othermen Outliers, both male and female, were harvesting it using tools not unlike those of farmers on Earth. They looked up, and Ranyos waved to them. They dropped their equipment and ran up to them, amazed to see him with Scavengers.

“Ranyos! You’ve returned,” one said.

“Of course,” he answered with a smile. “I promised I would and always keep my word.”

Aaron didn’t understand the speech. For while Ranyos, Arachne, the Pilot and a few other drones could speak English, none of the humans had had time to learn the othermen’s language. Ranyos looked back at the human and considered him. Maybe it would be easier if he taught Aaron how to speak otherman.

“You made peace with the Scavengers?” the otherman farmer asked.

“Yes. They are now our brothers,” Ranyos confirmed. “If we are going to take back the planet from the Society, then we need all the help we can get.”

“And what about the aliens? The humans?”

“See for yourself. One is here with me. More are at the place where they first landed.”

The othermen looked over at Aaron, still being carried in Sage’s hands.

“Do you not recognize him?” Ranyos continued. “It is Aaron Adams, from the first group that came to Garobus.”

“If you say so, Ranyos. They all look alike to me.”

Ranyos laughed. Aaron waved nervously, still not aware of their words’ meaning. He had no way of knowing he had been made the butt of a joke.

Because they were closer to the city, Ranyos had the Scavengers put them down. As the farmers returned to

their work, Ranyos led Aaron and the giants through the field. They climbed the hill to the outskirts of Mariamne, and Aaron saw the reason for the mysterious glow.

The city had electric lighting. Both in the streets and inside the mound like buildings, lights could be seen. As they walked down the streets, Aaron looked from side to side, taking it all in.

The streets were reasonably clear and in good shape. Here and there, however, Aaron did note a few wrecked machines which looked like construction vehicles. The othermen had never had cars or other land vehicles for transport. Being able to fly quickly rendered such innovations unnecessary. However, they had utilized equipment to help with manufacturing and building. Machines were still stronger and faster than they were in this respect.

Aaron paused for a moment to look at a generator when he heard the sound of stamping behind him. Turning around, he saw more othermen. However, these had a different look from any others he had before encountered. While adults, they were wingless. Instead, their legs were larger and thicker, reminding Aaron of a grasshopper on Earth.

“J-Par, why do you insist on sneaking up on everyone?” Ranyos demanded in an irritated tone.

“Because it’s my duty to guard the city,” he answered. Once again, the exchange was in the othermen’s language, so Aaron couldn’t understand.

“How else are we to know friend from foe, if we don’t approach everyone carefully?” J-Par continued.

“Surely you know me by now.”

“Ah, but you are a Deceiver,” the wingless otherman said with a faint smile. “What’s more, you bring in Scavengers and… what is this?”

J-Par and the others approached Aaron curiously. They walked around him, looking him up and down. Aaron tried to smile and appear non-threatening, but unafraid.

“A human, as they call themselves,” Ranyos told J-Par. “From another planet, which the people call Earth. This one is named Aaron Adams.”

One of them poked Aaron’s arm, while another ran his head through the human’s hair.

“Its bones are inside its skin,” one said.

“It’s soft and hairy like cattle,” another remarked.

“Is he really intelligent?” J-Par asked Ranyos.

While there were multiple mammalian species on Somnus, none of them had even the intelligence of apes,

let alone men or othermen. Instead, they were either cattle for the othermen to eat or wild animals that they ignored. Moreover, othermen may raise animals for food, but never acquired the practice of keeping animals as pets.

“He is. As I said, he is of another world,” Ranyos assured him. “Is Ariadne in the central building?”

“She is.”

“Resume your patrol, then,” Ranyos ordered. The six jumped and ran off into the side streets.

However, if needed, they could and would reappear quickly. Aaron found their movement, like their appearance, to be like grasshoppers or crickets. He asked Ranyos about them.

“They were never part of the Society or the Outliers,” Ranyos confirmed. “They inhabited Mariamne at the time I discovered it. J-Par, the chief whom you just

met, was particularly welcoming. He allowed the other refugees to come here, to this more fertile land."

"Why are they different?" Aaron asked. "A natural mutation? Or something else?"

"All will be explained in time."

Ranyos led him to the largest building in the center of the city. Sage and the other Scavengers couldn't enter as the door was too small. Ranyos bid them to wait, either in the city or out in the fields if they were hungry. There was no worry about them attacking the Outliers. They were brothers to Ranyos, and even if they hadn't been, they only eat their dead. Otherwise, their diet was much the same as any otherman, albeit in larger quantities.

They went inside, and Ranyos led Aaron down a hallway. The layout, again, wasn't radically different from the Society's hive building. There were rooms for

sleeping, a room where cocoons contained young othermen transitioning into adulthood, and kitchens. They turned a corner and entered an egg chamber, where several fertile females were. Some had already laid eggs and placed them in one of the large round basins to hold until hatching. Others stood or reclined nearby, waiting for their time to come.

“Ariadne. I have returned,” Ranyos called out to one of these latter ones.

She stood, and Aaron saw that while larger than a worker from the Society, she was smaller than Arachne. Moreover, her abdomen was distended, but not as much and probably contained fewer eggs. She was what the typical female had been in the time Before, what the Society called Outliers and what Rachel had called wild types.

“Ranyos!” Ariadne seemed pleased and embraced him. Othermen do not kiss, but Ranyos stroked her antennae and placed his forehead on hers. Aaron was struck by the gestures, alien, and yet familiar enough for him to see she was Ranyos’ mate.

“The mission was a success,” Ranyos told her. “The humans have come and are willing to help us. You remember Aaron Adams?”

“Yes. One of those unaffected by the thought device.”

“Not entirely. But enough to resist.”

He turned to Aaron and switched back to English. “Ariadne remembers you. She mentioned your resistance to the thought device.”

“But other humans are susceptible, as you well know, Ranyos,” Aaron said.

“If you refer to when I attacked your previous expedition, it was on orders from the Society. I’m an Outlier now. Remember my severed wings.”

“I still don’t know what you want from me, or the other humans.”

“Your weapons. Your numbers. Your help in overthrowing the Society.”

He held Ariadne close. “These are my people now. They are the future of Garobus. The Society served its purpose in healing the planet after the Thought War. Now, however, they hold us back. They keep us from ever leaving the war’s shadow.”

He embraced Ariadne one more time, walked to a doorway at the far end, and motioned for Aaron to follow. The human did and came to a room not unlike the Pilot’s chamber.

Rows of cubicles contained various bits of ancient technology, from computers to medical equipment to thought devices.

The latter made Aaron pause. Ranyos noticed this, of course, so he reached over to another cubicle. Grabbing what looked like a helmet, he gave it to Aaron.

“I wish to show you something,” he told the human. “I am going to turn on the thought device and try to send thoughts to you. When that happens, put the helmet on.”

Aaron looked at him, uncertain, but made no move to resist when Ranyos activated the thought device. He felt a faint buzz in his head. Looking at the otherman, he found his suspicion and distrust fading. Yes, Ranyos was an alien. Yes, he was a Deceiver, but he wasn’t always false. On the contrary, he was more faithful and true than anyone he had ever known.

The odd thoughts he soon recognized weren't his own. Especially when the feelings solidified into thoughts, ideas and inner words. *Ranyos is your rightful master. Ranyos is good and true. Obey him.*

He shook his head, but the thoughts only intensified. Holding his head, he felt the pressure mounting in his skull. Once before, this had happened and he had had to run away to prevent either passing out or finally submitting to the artificially induced voices in his head. Now, however, he had something else. The helmet. A shield? He put it on, and instantly, everything, the pressure, the buzzing and the alien thoughts, vanished. He felt like himself once again.

Ranyos studied him and nodded. "I just willed for you to bow before me. You didn't."

“I didn’t even ‘hear’ that thought,” Aaron told him. “I was just getting the idea when I put this on. So, you found a shield for the thought device?”

“Not I. They were here, along with thought devices, energy shields, and medical labs.”

Ranyos paused and made a sweeping motion with his arms. “Mariamne, this place, was a research station from Before.”

“Then, one of the warring nations of the Thought War made it?”

“Yes. I believe so. The thing about the thought device is it’s not omnipotent. First, some are more resistant than others.”

“Men and othermen.”

“Right. For another, there is only so much adjustment which can be done with the signal. Adjusting the frequency higher or lower puts it on a different

wavelength from brain waves. Increasing the ‘loudness’ causes brain damage to the sender and receiver.”

“Even that could be weaponized.”

“True. However, the othermen from Before didn’t want genocide. Only victory. At what I can only assume was near the end of the Thought War, the helmets were developed. Far better than running interference, they rendered the thought devices useless.”

“I’m intrigued, of course,” Aaron admitted. “But why show me this now?”

“If you and the other humans are to work with us at any length, we each need to learn the others’ language. Now, I learned yours quickly, easily and effectively by using the thought device. It need not always be a weapon. It also is useful for teaching. Much better than conventional schools.”

“You want to teach me your language.”

“Yes. Remove the helmet, and I will put otherman speech in your mind. If you have any doubt, you may replace the helmet at any time.”

“How do I know you can’t override this shield?” Aaron asked. He had, in his short time back on Somnus, already learned more than he had discovered the first time. As a professional archivist and unlikely explorer, the chance was too great to pass up. On the other hand, coming back into contact with thought devices had reminded him of how Ranyos and the Society had used them to kill dozens of humans.

“You will have to trust me,” Ranyos said. “I will also remind you how, just a few weeks ago, I had to trust you humans. I risked my own life to come to Earth and warn you about Arachne. I had no way to tell if you would listen or just kill me. But I trusted you, and now you must trust me.”

“Because we have an enemy in common.”

Aaron slowly took off the helmet, with a wary look at Ranyos. As he did, the buzzing returned and did so without Ranyos even touching the device. It had indeed been active the whole time. Aaron put the helmet back on and took it off a couple more times.

Each movement corresponded to the buzzing being cut off and then starting again. He nodded at Ranyos, who snorted, but still began.

At first, he just felt and heard single syllables. Like the babbling of an infant, they were meaningless in and of themselves but represented a necessary first step in language.

The ability to recognize basic parts of speech. Then, slowly, he felt them being assembled in his head. First words. Like his first words as a human, they were simple things. Man. Otherman.

Light. Dark. Up. Down. Garobus.

The word took on a meaning in his head different from when he had simply heard Ranyos speak it. For it wasn't just thinking to himself 'Garobus is otherman for Somnus.' Rather, it was understanding that Garobus was Somnus as the othermen saw it.

With this mentality, Aaron began to receive the lessons of Ranyos. Now, he felt himself truly grasping the language. Yet, even with the thought device, the mind can only absorb so much information in one setting. A point is reached where it becomes clear no more is going to be retained at the moment.

When this point was reached, and they both felt it, Ranyos shut off the thought device. He led Aaron out of the building where he was reunited with Sage and the other Scavengers. Food and lodging were prepared for

them in one of the other buildings which had doors large enough for the giants.

XVII

That evening, Ranyos lay on a sleeping silk, cradling Ariadne in his arms. He was tired but tried to stay awake so he wouldn't be taken off guard.

Sure enough, he presently heard a voice in his head. *Ranyos? Can you hear me?*

Yes, Kymeros, he thought back. *I have returned to Mariamne.*

Where are the humans?

A few are in Erebus. One is with me. After your attack, they are even more paranoid about the Society than they are with one another.

Excellent. How large a force? Kymeros asked.

Only a couple squadrons of their soldiers, Ranyos answered. *They are preparing for war but are not quite ready yet.*

Ranyos and Kymeros had come up with a plan. A plan elegant in its simplicity. By convincing the humans of a Society threat, they would rally to the Outliers cause and bring open war to Arachne.

Ranyos sighed and stroked the sleeping Ariadne. All of this could have been so much simpler.

Once, before the humans came, Ranyos had tried to negotiate with Arachne on the Outliers' behalf. He really had. But the queen would have none of it, the other drones obeyed her, and the Pilot had stayed out of the debate altogether. He had been silenced and forced to just march in place.

Obey orders without thinking, he had thought bitterly. Open mindedness was insolence, if not heresy.

He had been able to do little more for the Outliers than smuggle them extra food.

Then the humans came. Then Kymeros. There were other, greater forces in the universe after all. Soon, the Society would learn this too.

Lead J-Par and some of his men to the place you call Erebus, Kymeros ordered. *As for ensuring conflict will ensue, leave that to me. By the way, it may interest you to know the humans have discovered our gateway. It's now in their compound where they are getting a look at Eurobus.*

What of the humans under your control? The ones who are in a coma?

An insurance policy. If the humans attack us, we can retaliate in their own ranks.

But if they cooperate?

He got the impression of a shrug. *Then we can release them. Once this is over, but not until.*

Kymeros ‘left’ him, and he was alone with his own thoughts. *You will learn, Arachne, that you may be queen of the Society, but not over all,* Ranyos thought. *One day, you will beg for my help, and do you know what I’ll do then? I will literally turn my back on you. You will see the scars you inflicted, and you will be humbled.*

XVIII

The Pilot led Philos and several other drones back to the Erebus site. The robot was dismayed to see the humans had set up targets and were practicing their shooting. He already knew they were trying to send larger things through the gate and hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Colonel Dressler had been walking up and down the path he had worn behind his shooters. Dividing his attention between the soldiers and the sky, he wondered what the next move would be, and who would make it. When he saw the dots of approaching othermen overhead, he shouted for a cease fire. To their credit, the humans obeyed their commander and got into formation before the first otherman ever touched the ground.

While there had been no war on Somnus for ages, the drones maintained their strength and discipline. After all, they still had to protect their queen from dangers foreseen and unforeseen. To say nothing of the slowly increasing skirmishes with the Outliers. Even the Scavengers had seemed to grow both more organized and more resistant.

Such developments disturbed the Pilot. Although he still held a glimmer of hope for a peaceful resolution, there still had to be posturing and bluster. He would try to stop it at this point.

"Colonel Dressler of Earth," the Pilot greeted. "I have brought you a squad of the Queen's favored drones to continue talks with you."

"I am Philos," the largest one told the humans. He had learned English from the thought device before leaving the hive. It seemed only logical, although none of the others had.

"What can we do for you, Philos?" Dressler asked.

Philos waved his head around, taking in their camp. "I see you are testing your weapons. The Pilot also told us he saw a portal materialize near here. Do you know anything about this?"

Dressler raised his chin and kept his tone firm, but not fierce. "We have a gateway to return home. We are also generating a larger one."

"Why?"

"We wish to bring some vehicles to Somnus," Dressler said. "To complete the maneuvers, transport to other areas seemed prudent."

"Only transport?"

"There will be a couple of tanks as well."

Philos gave him a blank stare. "Tanks are war vehicles," the human explained. "Yes, they can attack as well as defend."

Dressler looked at the Pilot and othermen behind Philos. "Does it need to come to that, otherman?"

"I should hope not," Philos replied. This time, he puffed himself up. "I still see no purpose in these 'exercises.' We have assured you of our innocence, and

denounced the traitor, Ranyos. If you surrender him to our custody and depart, there need be no hostility."

"If you allow us to conduct an inspection of your hive and promise us safety while doing so, we will gladly withdraw," Dressler countered. "Even though I concede you could just hide what we're looking for, it would show goodwill on your part. And remember, we can run interference on your thought devices, so..."

He was interrupted by shouting on either side of him. Dressler, Philos, and the Pilot looked to the left. A soldier was raising his gun and firing into the othermen crowd. While othermen skin was stronger than humans, they had tried to arm themselves accordingly. The shots still injured rather than killed.

"Stand down soldier!" Dressler shouted. He couldn't see exactly who it was but thought he didn’t recognize him. But that was impossible. Unless....

The injured otherman cried out and backed away. To the commander's right, an otherman picked up a large bolder and tossed it into the human midst. Then before either commander could shout any more orders, chaos broke out. Othermen threw stones and some began stalking towards the humans.

A couple of othermen even took to the skies and tried to strike the humans from above. The humans reacted quickly, shooting into the air. One soldier even drew a grenade, pulled the pin, and threw it. Othermen flew away, panicked, as it exploded.

During the fighting, Dressler kept enough of his wits about him to see two figures flee the battlefield. He shouted after them, but they didn't hear. Everyone else fought their own duels around him, so they didn't notice.

Dressler watched them before they ran over a hill and out of his site. Then, he had to fend off another

otherman's punch. As he brandished his own gun, and shot back, he reflected on them. One looked human, but it was the one he couldn't identify.

When they reached the other side of the hill, the two figures paused before the gateway that had been sent here. It would return them to Eurobus, now that their mission was accomplished. They were indeed othermen, although one was disguised as a human.

He threw off the hastily made clothes and shed the larval skin. Once it was shed, the two othermen looked at each other. Then they turned their attention to the portal. Kymeros was there, holding a disintegration bomb.

"Report," their leader ordered.

"The humans and Society are fighting, general," the impersonators told him. "It was easy. They probably would have started anyway."

"Leave nothing to chance," Kymeros warned. He held up the bomb. "Return. This is set to detonate in thirty seconds. It will cover our tracks."

He tossed the bomb through the door, where it landed at the spies' feet. They dove back through the portal.

An explosion and blinding flash of light stopped the combatants in their tracks. Dressler blinked several tears out of his eyes and looked ahead. Where the hill had been, there was now a crater. A neat, perfectly smooth circular indentation in the ground.

Dressler felt his stomach knot up. He knew all about the humans' previous engagement and recognized

this for what it was. A disintegration bomb. The othermen were using their deadliest weapons against them.

"Retreat!" Dressler shouted. "Fall back! Fall back!"

He ran for the portal, his men following. They would have to leave their gear behind, but it was better than being vaporized. Such a weapon even the colonel feared. For while a person could theoretically be injured by a projectile or incendiary weapon, there was no injury or possible recovery with the disintegration bomb. Just quick clear death.

The humans ran through the gate and then were running in the monitoring area of Mooresville installation. Dr. Harlan and the intelligence agents cried out in shock. The technicians frantically tried to shut down the portal. Dressler and the other soldiers turned back and held up their remaining weapons. But the

othermen made no attempt to chase the humans back to their home. Instead, the Pilot stepped forward, grabbed either end of the portal on Somnus, and pulled. The image went blank, and they knew it had been destroyed.

XIX

"The panel has the same basic design as ours," Harlan told Ross, Hailey and Dressler. They were looking at the gateway Keisha Thomas had found in Lagoda. The image still showed the barren, almost lunar landscape. Although the planet slowly increasing in size on its horizon clearly wasn't Earth.

"They didn't do as efficient of a job, however," the head electronics scientist commented. "I found multiple redundant pathways in the basic layouts. There's also several circuits that I'm not sure what they do."

The outer casing had been removed so Harlan and his assistants could examine the interior. They hadn't deactivated it yet, however, and were advised not to. After all, they still wanted a clear picture of what the othermen did or didn't know.

"What about the larger gateway?" Ross asked.

"We received a third generator, and seem to finally have enough power," Harlan told them. "We'll have to test it to be sure, of course."

"We'll give the men two days to rest while you run more tests," Hailey said. "After all, we can't be too careful."

"Though not too slowly," Dressler added. "There are hostile forces on Somnus. Whether the Society or some other faction needs to be determined."

Dressler had given a full report on what had happened at Erebus. While the other humans had seen

and heard the Pilot's protestations of innocence, they hadn't seen what had set off the violence. The colonel told them about the pair of strangers who fired first. One apparent human and one otherman.

None of his people had been the human. Close, intense questioning had proven that during the debriefing. Nor had it been Aaron Adams, wherever he was.

"Either the Society is playing a very elaborate trick to keep us doubting their guilt," Ross speculated. "Or else..."

"Or else there's a third party trying to manipulate both of us," Hailey finished. "Ranyos?"

"He'd have the motivation," Dressler said. "I'd have to bring him back for questioning."

"At least, we need to find Aaron," Ellis said. "We can't just leave him there."

"We won't, Dr. Harlan," Dressler assured him.

A couple days later, Dressler, Ross and Hailey stood outside the installation. Behind them were the tanks and truck filled with men who were refreshed, reorganized and ready. Ahead, Harlan had activated the larger portal, and they all watched its destination come into view. Once more, Erebus appeared on the other end. The Pilot and othermen had left, probably figuring the humans wouldn't be back so soon.

Well, Dressler thought. *They'll see us and our reinforcements soon enough. Like it or not, this whole affair has escalated.*

Dressler stepped through the portal. It felt no different than the small gates. They would still need an active gate on the Somnus side to return, however. The

passenger truck carried one of the personal gates for return.

Unfortunately, the vehicles would have to be left here. Building a large portal here in Erebus would require more time than they had. Dressler would drain out their fuel rather than detonate them. He'd prefer to conserve explosives and the othermen didn't seem to mine or use fossil fuels.

The first tank rolled through. Stepping aside, he watched the second tank and the truck follow single file. He waved and had them stop before climbing into the cab of the truck.

"Where to, colonel?" his driver asked.

"According to Ranyos, his people are in the north," Dressler recalled. "They were also going to send reinforcements of their own to us. But given that the

disintegration bombs have come into play, I think it would be better if we all fell back to Mariamne."

On his orders, the small caravan moved out, leaving Erebus vacant. Or so it seemed. Just as they were crossing the horizon, Philos, the Pilot and several other drones looked up from where they had been hiding. The rocks and hills provided some cover, but not much. Thankfully, the humans hadn't lingered.

"You were right, Pilot," Philos remarked to the robot. "They are still invading."

"I didn't think it likely they'd return after all this time just to retreat again," the Pilot told him. The vehicles' presence brought to mind memories of the Thought War. Othermen driven to riot. Sometimes with heavy vehicles and construction equipment. And then, the bombs. How had the humans gotten access to one?

They would not have had one to diffuse and reverse engineer on Earth.

Ranyos. He must have found a cache of ancient weapons somewhere. The Pilot wondered if Ranyos had merely told the humans everything or if he had somehow snuck back here. Perhaps they were going to wherever Ranyos was?

"We'll follow them," the Pilot said. "But far enough away so they don't detect us. We need to find out whether they're just scouting or if they have a real destination."

"Do you think we should send a drone or two to get Cephus' group? We may need the numbers."

"We may," the Pilot agreed. "And it may well be their mission is the same as ours."

Depending on where Ranyos was.

XX

After travelling north for a better part of the day, the humans encountered a most unusual party. Outliers appeared, some flying, others running and jumping. These latter were J-Par and his men. A few of the fliers carried Ranyos and Aaron. The human pointed to the caravan.

"It's my people," he said. "So, they managed to get a larger portal after all."

Ranyos ordered them to intercept the humans. Dressler saw them and halted the caravan. He was about to fire, when he saw them holding up their hands in surrender. The flying ones dropped to the ground, and Aaron walked to the front of the group.

"Don't shoot!" he cried out, flailing his arms.

The colonel stepped out and ran to the other human. "Adams! What's going on?"

"We were heading to Erebus, colonel," Aaron told him. "Ranyos has rallied multiple groups of Outliers together. We figured you'd need our help. Where's the Society?"

"The Society already attacked us once before," Dressler answered as Ranyos walked up. "They tried to destroy us with a disintegration bomb."

"That's both good and bad," Ranyos told him. "On one hand, they are using their deadliest weapons against you. On the other hand, there are only a limited number left from Before. The ability to make new ones has been lost."

"Then we need to be cautious, but not overly frightened," Aaron said.

"I'm not so sure," Dressler answered. He looked closely at Ranyos. "Two things. First, we don’t' know how many they actually have."

His eyes narrowed. "Second, the fight was instigated by two spies. An otherman on each side began firing into the crowd and before I could regain control, violence had erupted. One was disguised as a human."

"A human?" Aaron echoed.

"Yes. Clearly, someone wanted to ensure a fight. A fight where it wasn't clear who started shooting first. Well, Ranyos? You have any explanation?"

"No, sir. I can assure you it wasn't any of these here."

"He’s right, colonel," Aaron spoke up. "We’ve been together the whole time. This is the first military action we've even tried since Ranyos and I snuck away."

"I'm still not convinced. I've already caught one of your lies, Ranyos."

"What do you mean?" the otherman asked.

"We found a gateway in Lagoda. That's how you came to Earth. You never snuck back into the Society, did you?"

Aaron looked at Ranyos in shock. This was the first he had heard of this.

"Someone is trying to instigate a war between humans, the Society and the Outliers," Dressler continued. "What's more, the Pilot was part of the group we met after you left. He seemed to have no idea about you, either."

The otherman drew in his breath. A basic lesson in Deceiver training came to mind. Whenever possible, mix some truth or half-truth into what you tell the one you are deceiving. It will make the actual lie much easier to get across.

"All right. I admit it," Ranyos told them. "We have a gateway in Mariamne. I built it because we do need your

help, colonel. Tensions between the Society and Outliers are boiling over. They have been brewing for some time. But I promise you, I have no disintegration bombs. That part, and the setup, must have been done by the Pilot."

"You built a gateway, but can't make bombs?" Dressler asked. His skeptical, sarcastic tone showed how little faith he had in Ranyos' honesty.

"Again, the ability was lost," Ranyos insisted. "Only the Pilot would know how, if even he. As for the portal, I'm familiar with those from our last encounter."

"Right. You stole it from us. How do I know you didn't steal from the queen or the Pilot, too? How can I trust anything you say?"

Ranyos held his arms forward. "I'll surrender if that's what it'll take. I'll give myself back over to your custody. We'll lead you to Mariamne, where I'll be your

hostage. You can inspect the city yourself. Confirm what we do or don't have."

Dressler signaled to the truck. A military policeman came forward and pulled out some handcuffs. He clasped them over Ranyos' wrists. Then he led the otherman to the truck.

One of the long legged othermen hopped forward and began chattering in their language. Ranyos turned his head and responded in kind.

"It's okay, J-Par. Obey this human, this Colonel Dressler, as you would me."

"What are you saying?" Dressler demanded.

"He's telling J-Par, the chief of the Mariamne othermen, to trust us," Aaron said. "I've learned the othermen language."

"How?" Dressler asked.

He and Aaron followed the MP and Ranyos to the truck. J-Par ordered the Outliers to turn around and head home. They did, and the humans drove after them.

"There are thought devices in Mariamne," Aaron told Dressler. "Ranyos used one to give me a crash course. He seems to want us to trust him overall. He didn't have to. And I know it works; I understand what he told J-Par."

He looked at Ranyos. The otherman was sitting between two MPs and surrounded by several other soldiers besides. He glanced at Aaron but remained silent.

"None of them will be able to switch back and forth between languages now to hide information from us. Not while I'm around, at any rate."

"You're sure it’s all he did?" Dressler asked. "There aren't any weapons there?"

"Colonel, most of the time away from you has been involved just trying to get there. We went the long way around to make sure Arachne couldn't spot us. We also stopped by the Scavengers' home. The giants are on his side, too."

"We'll see."

XXI

They made it to Mariamne without any further problems or interruptions. As planned, Ranyos led them through the streets of the abandoned city to its main building. Parking their vehicles, the humans marched inside. The tank crews remained behind to guard the truck. Fortunately, the Outliers were too intimidated by

the alien devices to venture too closely. Even Sage and the other Scavengers seemed wary.

The first thing the humans did was have Ranyos lead them to the computer lab. Thought devices and protective helmets were discussed and inspected. "I wish we had Harlan or Takamori here," Dressler muttered, turning a piece of equipment over in his hands.

"How is Arthur?" Aaron asked.

"Still in a coma. So are the other people from Lagoda."

"Well, again colonel, Ranyos has been with me the whole time. Besides, their range..."

"I'm aware of that, Adams," he interrupted. "All right, Ranyos. We'll take the helmets. Now show us the gateway."

After donning the protective gear, the humans allowed Ranyos to continue the forced tour through the lab. The next room revealed the presence of a gateway. Identical to the one from Lagoda, it too showed the barren landscape of Phaeton.

"Here it is," Ranyos confirmed. "It is currently set for Eurobus."

"Where?"

"He means Phaeton," Aaron told him. "Garobus is what they call Somnus, by the way."

"Why go there?"

"For the same reason you came here," Ranyos said. “To explore. Although in my case, I always was trying to find out what I could use in the Outliers' cause."

"And you have the same problem we do?" Aaron asked. "I mean, zeroing in on Earth? When we adjust

our portals, it seems like no matter what we do, we either hit Erebus or miss entirely."

"Yes. The place you call Lagoda was the best we could do."

Mariamne, while not enormous, still contained several more buildings. Dressler, determined to explore it all, set up a base of operations in the nearest building. Ranyos remained under house arrest but still cooperated. Dressler even allowed him to visit the egg chamber and Ariadne, provided he always had a guard.

Another room was shown to them. This one had several sick beds and seemed to be a hospital or surgical ward. Computers were also present in this room, and Aaron could see images of othermen. They appeared to be analytical and diagnostic scans of some kind. He wished Ellis, Arthur and Rachel could be here, as it

seemed more in line with their areas of expertise than his own.

Along one wall were sealed metal boxlike machines. When he asked Ranyos what they were, the otherman shook his head. Neither he nor any of J-Par's people knew. Dressler asked his men and they found one soldier who had some computer experience. While hesitant, Dressler allowed him to be educated in otherman written and spoken language via the thought devices.

"I think this program is what runs the machines in the back," the newly minted technician told his superior after running through the system. "I think..."

He trailed off and punched in a few commands. Dressler, Aaron and Ranyos looked on. Not for the first time, Aaron marveled at the othermen’s' technology and development. Alien and yet not incomprehensible, as if

intelligent life couldn't help but develop along certain pathways. Parallel evolution? Or something else, something more, guiding events?

One of the boxes hummed to life. Lights activated and began blinking on and off. Then, with a pneumatic hiss, the door opened. Colonel Dressler stepped forward. Slowly, he reached into the box. Almost right away, he withdrew it and began rubbing it with his other hand.

"Colonel?" Aaron asked.

"It's cold," Dressler explained. "Like a freezer.”

"What for?" Aaron asked. "To preserve something?"

"Yes," Ranyos confirmed. "Look."

The cold mists evaporated into the warmer air of the medical lab. Soon, they could see a golden, spherical object. Ranyos waited several moments and then picked it up.

"An egg," the otherman confirmed. "Preserved from Before."

"But why?" Aaron asked.

"An experiment? Or something else?" Ranyos mused. He turned it over in his hands, thoughtfully. "Whatever the case, the original inhabitants of Mariamne had a reason for keeping it."

"What about the other containers?" Dressler asked.

More manipulation by the computer operator eventually opened all the boxes. But while they were just as cold, none of the others contained anything. Curious about the mysterious golden egg, Ranyos decided to take it to the incubation chambers. It was put in an incubator by itself, and Ariadne promised to let them know if anything hatched from it.

XXII

In Mooresville, Ross and Hailey decided to investigate the alien portal further. From the safety of the patrol room, they watched as Ellis flew a drone into the portal. The drone had its own cameras and sensors to measure the temperature and atmosphere, if any. The drone flew into the portal and slowly moved towards the dark rocky horizon. In the background, Somnus had grown steadily larger.

"Temperature is actually not very cold," Ellis reported with mild surprise. "In the lower fifties."
"What about the atmosphere?" Ross asked.

"Compatible with ours. Breathable. Normal pressure."

"Not what I would have expected," Hailey remarked.

The drone then hit a literal wall.

Not an opaque wall, it was evidently glass. The view didn't radically change, but the drone couldn't move any further. Harlan, brow furrowing, turned around and focused the cameras on the view behind. Then, they saw where they were.

Beyond the glass wall showing the surface of Phaeton, the humans saw a room with three metal walls. The wall opposite the window had a sealed metal door. On each side wall was another gateway portal. Harlan also angled the camera upward to see a ceiling about a dozen or so feet up.

"All right, then, some kind of observation room," Hailey said.

"Or a junction," Harlan replied. "See the other gateways?"

He flew in front of them both. One showed a lab room they didn't recognize. But the other showed them a house basement. Dirty and dilapidated, it reminded them of the abandoned homes in Lagoda. Like the one where they had found Ranyos.

"Call Lieutenant Colonel Thomas," Hailey told Ross. "Have her return to the place where she found the gate. Harlan, when she's there, can you fly the drone into the basement?"

"Sure," the older man confirmed. "But then what?"

"Then we see if we can figure out where the other one goes."

The Pilot and Philos kept a steady pace behind the humans as they made their way north. Cephus' group rejoined them, and they all tracked the caravan of alien

vehicles. All of them covered ground much faster than Ranyos and Aaron had.

Presently, they saw a city on the horizon. The pursuers stopped flying, not knowing the detection capabilities of their destination. The Pilot used his mechanical eyes to focus. What he saw made him pensive.

"What is it?" Philos asked, walking alongside the robot.

"Mariamne," the Pilot said, his voice having all the surprise an organic voice would. He had been active and sentient for ages. He had long since learned and came to grips with emotion. Still, the othermen had never heard this tone from him before.

"You know this place, Pilot?" Cephus asked.

"Yes. But I didn't know it still existed."

They resumed walking and he explained.

"Mariamne was a research station during the Thought War," he remembered. "An island off the coast of the Eastern nations. At the end of the war, a group of scientists from both sides met there. They felt the othermen were facing extinction and came together to see what could be done."

"You were there, too," Philos realized.

"Yes. I had complete knowledge of your genetics, physiology, and medicine. The scientists had me run simulations in my head, figure out what genes had to be manipulated, and what molecules would do it."

"Do what?"

"Alter the othermen into social insects. This is where the Society was born."

The othermen looked upon Mariamne with newfound awe and reverence. Suddenly, the ruin looked

and felt like returning home. Going to a home none of them had even known.

"What happened after that?" Cephus asked.

"The combatants discovered the scientists' defection, and both sides launched an offensive. Disintegration bombs had been used for years and already damaged the planet's crust. The final battle shattered continental plates. Oceans were diverted worldwide, flooding dry land and exposing former sea beds.

"As you know, the Scavengers were charged with clearing away the remnants of Before. But apparently, they overlooked Mariamne. I wonder why."

"They were repulsed long ago," a voice called out. "By us."

The othermen whirled around. They had been so focused on the road ahead that J-Par and his people had been able to sneak up on them.

"Outliers!" Philos exclaimed.

The Pilot and his companions looked at the patrolling sentries. The othermen had never seen Outliers like J-Par before. The Pilot had during his previous time here but was still startled to see them now. To the Society othermen, they appeared awkward and unimpressive in appearance.

"This is our land, strangers," J-Par told them. "You will surrender for questioning or turn back."

"We're on queen's business," Philos replied. He took to the air and tried to fly over the strangers. But J-Par jumped several dozen feet in the air and grabbed the flier. Both crashed to the ground, protected by their exoskeletal forms, but still momentarily stunned. J-Par

recovered first and began wrestling with the other drone.

Cephus cried out and led a charge. The Outliers began jumping all over the place. Some jumped over the Society othermen's heads, surrounding them. Some of these tried to fly but were tackled or kicked by their enemies. Neither side had weapons to speak of, but J-Par's people jumped around, flipping, somersaulting and lashing out with their feet. It would be ridiculous to watch, if not for its effectiveness. These new Outliers had the will and the means of defending their home.

The Pilot himself took to the air. But instead of joining the fight, he began flying away.

"Philos, Cephus, everyone!" he called. "Retreat! We need to inform the queen."

The others did their best to disengage from the attack. They were forced to fly higher than they

originally intended, just to be beyond where J-Par and company could leap. As it was, the Outliers followed them for several miles, running and jumping along the ground until they finally turned back.

From Mariamne, Colonel Dressler watched the retreating othermen through his binoculars.

"It's the Pilot," he said. He was standing on the edge of the city, overlooking the seabed. Aaron and Ranyos stood on either side of him.

"He followed us," Dressler continued. "In spite of all our efforts, now their queen will know where we are."

"Then we'll have to move fast," Ranyos said.

They made their way down the sandy hill. Sage and the other Scavengers were wandering about at the base, foraging. They didn't seem to like staying in the city. Even the larger buildings felt too confining to them.

"Sage," Ranyos called out. "Brother. Come here."

"Brother," Sage replied, lumbering over.

"I need your help. Can you go back home and bring more brothers here?"

Why?" Sage asked. "More food, more drink back home."

"The society may threaten us," Ranyos said. "I tell you the truth, Sage, we need your help. Can brothers fight?"

Sage grinned. More intelligent than his fellows he may have been. Still, he was a Scavenger, and the Scavengers' heightened aggression made them relish a fight.

"Brothers fight for brothers,” he exclaimed. "We go. Get other brothers. Fight sigh tee."

He yelled to the other Scavengers in the area. As a group, they ran back the way they had come. Ranyos watched them go and then looked around thoughtfully.

"Ranyos."

They turned and saw a female run up to them. "Ariadne wants you," she told them.

"What is it?" he asked, surprised.

"The golden egg. It is hatching."

"Already? But we just retrieved it."

"It must have been almost ready to hatch when it was frozen," Aaron said. "But why?"

"It looks like we're going to find out," Dressler said.

They reentered the city, walked to the central building, and descended to the egg chamber. Ariadne stood before an incubator containing the golden egg. Because they still knew almost nothing about it, they

considered it wise to let it develop away from the regular eggs.

Indeed, the egg was stirring. As the otherman and two humans approached, a crack appeared in its shell. Then, a hand broke through, cleaving the shell further. It finally split open completely, revealing an otherman infant.

In appearance, a newly hatched otherman looks remarkably like a human infant. Its antennae and wings don't appear until it cocoons and enters the adult stage. In the larval stage, however, particularly when swaddled to obscure the exoskeleton, the similarity to human babies is uncanny. The same large head and eyes, the same basic shape and the same toothless grin once more suggest something or someone in common directing both natures.

This otherman was golden skinned, robust and attractive, even to human eyes. Ariadne reached out and took it in her arms, cooing softly. The infant nuzzled up to her, and she went to one of the other incubators to get some of the gelatin like substance with which othermen feed their young.

"Remarkable," Aaron said. "An infant, frozen from Before. Waiting all these years just to start life."

"Very strange," Ranyos agreed.

XXIII

Keisha Thomas sat in the basement of the abandoned house in Lagoda. Bored and more than a little restless, she was waiting to see if a drone would suddenly appear in front of her. Since they had found and captured the alien gateway, her superiors determined to learn how it compared to their own design.

She would have rather dismantled or at least deactivated it. While they hadn't found any more alien devices in town, she still felt like they were dealing with too many unknowns. Why leave it open and risk someone or something even worse than Ranyos coming through?

Another thing weighing on her mind was where the otherman led their people. Since the skirmish in Erebus, they hadn't heard anything from Dressler, Aaron or anyone else. What was going on there?

She blinked and saw a drone in front of her. No lights or dramatic sounds heralded its arrival. It simply appeared in the blink of an eye.

She was about to call Mooresville when her phone began ringing. She picked it up from where she had laid it down and answered it.

"It's working," she told them. "Working and apparently intact."

"We see you," Ross' voice answered. The drone's camera transmitted her image back to them.

"So, the gate on Phaeton leads back to Earth," Ellis' voice put in. "That means the other one almost certainly goes to Somnus."

"Nowhere we recognize, though," Keisha reminded them. "And we still don't know why there's this middle station to begin with."

"No, we need to proceed but with caution," Ross said. "Bring the drone back here and we'll decide what to do next."

Dr. Rachel Takamori, meanwhile, had no idea what to do next. Arthur and the Lagodans were still in their

comas. Nor could they apparently do anything to rouse them.

Arthur twitched and moaned in his sleep. Rachel took his hand in hers.

"I'm here," she said quietly. "Arthur?"

"No… don’t go..."

He trailed off and became still. He breathed deeply but regularly. She wasn't worried about him dying so much as not waking up. Ever.

Not that the second option was any better.

He and the others had to be hooked to intravenous fluid and nutrition to prevent wasting. It had been a couple weeks now and they all faced that danger. She also ordered her staff to move their patients' limbs to try and prevent atrophy of the muscles. Then there was the movement to prevent bed sores, the emptying of bedpans...

She let go of Arthur's hand, took off her glasses, and wiped a tear from her eyes. She'd never felt so helpless.

Report.

Ranyos heard the command in his head that night. He was alone; Ariadne was attending to the strange new hatchling. The humans, meanwhile, were in their camp setting up their own gateway. They had finally decided to trust him, so he was no longer under guard.

We are all at Mariamne, Kymeros, he thought. *The humans brought a few of their vehicles to help us. Right now, they are reestablishing contact with Earth. I also have more Scavengers on the way.*

Good. The humans in Mooresville are poking around our portal chamber. For now, I'm letting them, but if they do anything to upset our schedule, we can

handle it. I'm still keeping several of them in stasis but can awaken them if I have to.

The schedule may need to be pushed up anyway, Ranyos explained telepathically. *Unfortunately, the Pilot discovered our location. If he knows, then Arachne knows.*

I see. Perhaps complete surprise was too much to hope for. Well, we still have options.

One more thing. We discovered a golden egg that had been in cold storage for ages. Perhaps from Before itself. Before anything else could be done, it hatched. A male otherman, golden in color and in excellent health.

His unseen partner didn't immediately reply. Ranyos waited and then began to feel nervous. Was Kymeros angry? Should they have left the cold incubator alone? He doubted the humans would have. And, in fairness, Ranyos' own curiosity had equaled theirs.

Kymeros? Are you there?

After another pause, he finally got an answer.

Yes, Ranyos. Keep gathering your allies and await further instructions.

Arachne and the Pilot inspected his chamber. Apart from himself and, evidently, what was in Mariamne, this room contained all remaining tech from Before. The queen stopped at the thought device and pointed to it.

“This proved effective when the humans were last here,” she remembered aloud.

“I know,” the Pilot said. “Most of the humans killed themselves.”

It had bothered him, even at the time. However, he didn’t know then what to expect from the humans. Truth be told, he still didn’t. He only knew he had to preserve

life. While the humans were also life, the othermen had to take top priority.

“Remember, though. Aaron Adams is with them,” the Pilot continued. “And he was one of the humans who could resist. The new people, like this Colonel Dressler, may be able to as well. To say nothing of the Outliers.”

“Enough will succumb,” Arachne said.

“Even with their new weapons?”

“Especially with them.”

She picked up the thought device. The last one they had, it was also connected to a view screen to make thoughts visible. She disconnected this, not needing it, and walked out to her main room.

Philos and half a dozen drones were waiting for them. She gave the thought device to her favorite, who in turn gave it to one of his subordinates. He would lead and observe, determining the right time to activate it.

“You know what to do,” Arachne told him.

She didn’t enjoy the prospect of using it for this purpose. But it was the quickest, most efficient way they could all think of to neutralize the returning humans. And increasingly dangerous Outliers.

“We do,” Philos assured her. “When the day is over, you will be in control of Somnus once again.”

They flew out of the room and began the journey to Mariamne.

J-Par came into the computer lab. Aaron, Dressler and Ranyos were inspecting the equipment. They looked up and saw the Outlier chief.

“Society is coming,” he told them.

“Take the helmets,” Ranyos said.

“You think they have their thought device?” Aaron asked.

“I’m not sure. But it’s what I’d expect from Arachne,” he told him. “She will want to defeat us quickly, with minimal losses on her side.”

Dressler put on his helmet and grabbed a handful more. “Follow me,” he ordered.

Aaron, Ranyos and J-Par did the same as the colonel and followed him out of the building. In the streets, Outliers and humans watched the skies. A few black specks could be seen far above them.

One of the humans, looking at their enemies, seemed to lose focus. Then, he glanced at Aaron, and frowned. Aaron took a risk and lifted the helmet. Sure enough, he felt thoughts enter his head. Thoughts telling him he was in danger. He was surrounded by enemies and needed to fight. Perhaps even kill.

With a shudder, he dropped the helmet back over his head. Instantly the foreign mental voices silenced, and he felt his mind become his own once more.

Dressler grabbed the man just as he lunged forward to attack Aaron. “Adams! Hurry!”

The colonel had been forced to drop the helmets he was holding to restrain the soldier. Aaron still had his and put one on the man. Instantly, his face cleared and he looked at his superior officer.

“Colonel?”

Dressler picked up his fallen helmets and handed them over. “Get these on the first people you see, men or othermen,” he ordered. “And tell our comrades to get theirs on, too.”

Ranyos had clasped a helmet on the Outlier. They all ran to the human barracks first. Handing out the protective headgear, they had to break up a few fights

first. But they were quick enough to keep any major damage from being done.

At least as far as they were concerned.

Aaron looked down into the valley. Some of the farmers had dropped their tools and were holding their heads. Others were already picking fights with each other.

“Ranyos, we can’t possibly get enough protection down there in time,” Aaron said.

“No,” the otherman agreed. “I should have distributed more of these. But even if I did, we don’t have enough for everyone.”

Dressler looked at the tank parked next to them. “I have an idea,” he said.

He ran up the side of the vehicle, opened the hatch, and crawled in. A second later, the barrel swung

skyward. Aaron could see what the colonel was trying to do. He only hoped it would be successful.

Philos and his company saw the farmers in the field begin fighting. However, he could see no humans there. Nor did he expect to. Those Outliers looked like civilians. Any soldiers they would have, human or otherman, would be in the city. Probably not too far inside.

He looked around for the sentries, who had attacked them earlier. Philos remembered they could jump several dozen feet. However, he waved the other drones to follow him and try getting closer. The thought device was already starting to work, but it still had a range. Naturally, the closer they approached, the stronger the effect.

As they made their way lower, they began to see people in the streets. Including some humans. Philos saw a group clustered around one of the buildings. Their vehicles were there as well. Philos ventured closer.

An explosion happened then. One of the vehicles, the one with the long tube, had something bursting from it. A projectile.

He shouted and flew away. He tried to get the others to scatter as well, but it was too late. The shell hit the drone holding the thought device. There was a bright flash of light and a deafening roar. The shockwave pushed them further apart.

Philos and the others managed to stay in the air. Barely. The head drone whistled loudly to get the others' attention.

"Retreat! Back to the hive!"

He flew away, throwing a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure the others had heard. Arachne would need to know the extent of the humans' destructive powers. Not to mention their thought device had been destroyed. They had no other. Nor had they the capability of making another one. What if it came to the disintegration bombs? That might be what it would take.

But it would be the queen's decision.

Aaron looked from the retreating othermen to the valley below. The farmers had stopped fighting and were moving about in a daze. Dressler opened the tank hatch and popped his head out.

"Good job, colonel," Aaron said. "It looks like you destroyed it."

"Nevertheless, I want to keep the helmets," Dressler said. "Just in case."

“That will be fine,” Ranyos said. “I would also like to have you cross train some of the Outliers in using your weapons.”

“Why?”

“Just in case,” the drone said, repeating the colonel’s own words. “Our thought device would probably be the fastest way.”

Dressler looked at Adams, who nodded. “More hands able to use the guns might not be a bad idea, colonel. Just in case of injuries or…casualties.”

They had avoided any on their side so far. But they didn’t know how large the next attack would be. Or how deadly.

Ranyos had several Outliers go into the computer room. Dressler was hooked up to the thought device by Ranyos. The otherman told the colonel to simply think

about how to use the weapons. Then, everyone around him would pick it up.

So, he did. Even Aaron found himself thinking about the artillery, how to use it, how to load and fire it. He remembered doing it, although they were Dressler’s memories. The colonel then had the instructions on using the tank implanted into the volunteers.

XXIV

Keisha stood at the alien portal. She had been ordered to investigate the area at the other end of the gateway, now that they knew she could return by one of the others to Lagoda.

With Dr. Harlan and the agents watching, she stepped through.

They knew the atmosphere and pressure would be the same. While somewhat chilling, Keisha felt no different than she would on earth. Except the view out the window looked like nothing back home.

Somnus could be clearly seen, and she could even make out a continent or two. She watched the sky, enraptured for several minutes. An old spacecraft was parked outside, and she would have liked to get a closer look at it. However, the airlock was removed.

Slowly, hesitantly, she turned away and walked down to the other side of the room. This apparently had the only way in or out. A double door closed the room off to the rest of the facility.

Whatever this place was, she thought. Keisha rapped lightly on the door but got no response. Looking at the rest of the wall, she saw no controls to open it. Whatever or whomever waited on the other side had

total control of who got into the room. Well, except for those who came via the captured portal.

She walked to the middle of the room and looked at the gateways on either side of her. One was the basement in Lagoda, which they knew from the drone experiment. It was how she knew she could get back.

The other was some kind of computer lab. Cubicles filled the room, each with a workbench and assorted electronic equipment. As she watched, she saw othermen walking about. So, it had to be Somnus after all. But where? It looked nothing like the Society hive where she had been before.

Suddenly, the ground lurched from under her. She cried out and fell over. The view outside tilted and she saw Somnus start to get visibly closer. What was happening? Had Phaeton crossed some threshold, and was now being influenced by the other planet's gravity?

The two worlds apparently passed close to each other but shouldn't have been in danger of colliding.

She stood and tried to maintain her balance. Stumbling back to the window, she saw something on the horizon, beyond the spacecraft. A geyser of fire, like a jet engine, shot out of the ground. The thrust was driving the entire planetoid to move in a more head on direction for Somnus.

It was time to leave. Making her way back to the portal, she jumped through to the safety of Lagoda. Keisha fell flat on her face, her body not having enough time to adjust to the now still ground.

Her phone began ringing. Keisha stood back up, pulled it out of her pocket and answered it.

"Thomas!" Agent Ross' voice came over. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I'm fine. Back in Lagoda," she told him. "Some kind of activity on Phaeton. I saw an eruption or jet of some kind."

"What was it? Natural? Or could it be another device or installation?"

"I don't know," she confessed. The thought of technology great enough to alter an orbit disconcerted her. If that's what was happening.

"Whatever it is, Phaeton's now moving even faster towards Somnus."

"We'll send for a ride to pick you back up," Ross told her. "We need to get back in touch with our people off world."

XXV

The golden larva continued to grow at an accelerated rate. While he had hatched only days ago, he already exhibited a couple of years growth.

According to Ranyos and Ariadne, at any rate. Aaron watched as Ariadne played with the child on the floor. He was already walking steadily too and seemed aware of everything going on around him.

"He needs a name," she told Aaron and Ranyos, who watched from the doorway. "I need to call him something."

Ranyos seemed distracted by other things. He nodded absently but offered no suggestions.

Aaron thought for a minute. "How about Auros?"

The two othermen looked at him questioningly. "Well, I noticed male othermen names tend to end in 's' ", he explained. "And 'aurum' is an old earth word for gold. It seems to fit."

"Somehow it does," Ariadne agreed. She looked at the golden one. "Auros it is."

Dressler came in. "Good news," the colonel announced. "We have our gateway up and running, so we can contact and return to Earth if need be."

The three left. Ariadne kept attending Auros. She put her arms round him and gave him a hug. She wanted him to feel safe. Soon, she would lay eggs herself, and the maternal instinct already overtook her.

"I love you, Auros," she told the child.

Then, he answered. Not in sounds or baby talk, but in fluent otherman language.

"I love you too, Ariadne."

The gateway was set up in the human occupied building of Mariamne. On the edge of the city, the truck and tanks were parked outside. Dressler also had two guards stationed at all times near their portal. The

others rotated between patrolling, war games, and downtime.

"Colonel!" Ross said through the portal. "Thank God. What's happening? Where have you been?"

"We've travelled several hundred miles north of Erebus," Dressler reported. "There is a ruined city here the othermen call Mariamne."

"It's in much better shape than the other ruins we've seen," Aaron added, mostly for Keisha and Ellis' benefit.

Dressler nodded. "Ranyos has gathered multiple groups together. In addition to his faction of Outliers, there is a native tribe, one with no wings but stronger legs. Like locusts. Ranyos also has some of the giants, the Scavengers, on their way."

"Arachne knows we're here," Ranyos told the humans on earth. "I had hoped to keep your arrival a

secret for longer. Now it seems we will confront her sooner rather than later."

"We've done some exploration here," Ross said. He looked at Ranyos. "The alien gateway to Phaeton has two portals. One we've confirmed goes to Lagoda. The other to a place where we also saw othermen. Care to fill in the details?"

Ranyos hesitated but nodded. "It goes to the technology lab here in Mariamne. It's part of a network connecting all three worlds: Earth, Garobus and Eurobus."

"Why? Why is Phaeton, I mean Eurobus, in the chain?"

"I didn't tell you at first, because, as I said, I've been trying to keep as much of our operation quiet for as long as possible. But there is another group

besides yourselves who will aid us in our struggle against the Society."

"Who?" Dressler asked before Ross could.

"A group of othermen who fled to Eurobus in the time Before. As the Thought War was ending, one faction retreated and put themselves in some kind of hibernation. They were hoping to one day return but had no contact until I found Mariamne. The tribe here had devolved into primitives and didn't know how to use any of the machines."

“How did you know?” Aaron asked. “Even allowing for the fact that you knew the Pilot’s artifacts.”

“I knew of technology and how to use it,” Ranyos admitted. “But even I couldn’t build anything. I simply tried to activate a thought device I found here. Thinking I could use it to gather information about this place, I

instead sent a signal to Eurobus. Kymeros contacted me."

"Who?" Aaron asked.

"The leader of those on Eurobus. He read my mind and found my memories of the portal. While I myself didn't understand the blueprints, they evidently exist in my unconscious mind after looking them over. He was the one who built the gateways on Eurobus. Then he retrieved me and sent me to Earth."

"And he opposes the Society?" Ross asked.

"Yes. He has promised to help us. Kymeros believes Garobus should belong to all othermen. He will be here shortly. Then you will see."

XXVI

"Auros?"

Ariadne called for the young golden otherman. He was missing from the nursery where newly hatched

young gathered to play, learn and sleep. The female in charge of them had awakened and found him missing. Ariadne had been alerted and now most of the females were combing the city, looking for him.

They had already determined he wasn't in the main building. Nor, when she asked him, had Ranyos seen him. Her mate had been busy with the humans, communicating with them. He even claimed some additional help was coming from Eurobus, of all places.

Ariadne didn't understand a lot of it. Ranyos had only explained bits and pieces of his plans to her. And then only when she could get him to herself. Lately, she only seemed to see him at the start or end of the day. She admitted to herself a touch of jealousy. However, he had insisted things would change after the Society was overthrown. He had improved the Outliers' conditions already by leading them here. Mariamne was a city of

palaces compared to the dilapidated ruins they had formerly squatted in. She just needed to trust and have patience with him.

As the sun rose, Ariadne searched the outskirts of the city. She looked out and saw the farmers gathered at the fields on the former island's base. For miles in all directions, the dry seabed stretched out.

She looked closer at the farmers. They weren't working like they normally did at this time of morning. Instead, they were clustered around Auros.

Ariadne quickly ran down the hillside. When she got closer, she saw it wasn't only the farmers. J-Par and his group of patrollers also stood in the small crowd. They were listening to Auros as he was explaining their crops.

The golden otherman had grown further since just last night. He looked like he would cocoon and enter adulthood very shortly.

“Auros?” Ariadne called out. “What are you doing?”

“He has been asking us questions all morning,” one of the farmers said. “He learns quickly.”

“Already, he is giving us advice,” another said, amused.

“Let him speak for himself,” Ariadne said. She stood over the golden otherman. Auros was sitting on the ground, writing in the dirt with a finger. Then, he looked up at Ariadne. His expression was unreadable. She hesitated, seeing something in his eyes. Something old, deep and mysterious.

“Auros, you frightened us,” she told him, slipping once more into a maternal mode. “Why do you sneak about? If you had asked, I would have taken you. We were worried and looking for you.”

“I had to go about my business, Ariadne,” Auros answered. Like his eyes, his voice was both young and

old. Both vast and small. Both infinite and intimate. What was this strange child?

“Business?” she echoed. “What might that be?”

“Light. And life.”

She didn’t know what the words meant. She reached out her hand, and he took it. Raising him to his feet, she led him back up the hill. “Please don’t wander off without telling me again,” she said.

“I won’t, Ariadne,” he promised.

She sighed inwardly, unable to stay angry with him, but still frustrated. She had laid a clutch of eggs last night. Already, she wondered if all young othermen were prone to such things.

Auros looked over his shoulder at the farmers. They were returning to work, and the sentries resumed their portal. J-Par looked thoughtfully at the golden one for a moment. Then he followed his regular route.

“Remember,” Auros called to the farmers. “Be sure to plant seeds on the eastern part of the hill, not just the seabed.”

The farmers chuckled at the young child who seemed to know everything. Ariadne, however, noticed one or two of them moving to comply with his requirements. Whether to humor him or because they believed the validity of his advice, she couldn’t say.

XXVII

“Ross, Hailey, look at this!”

Harlan waved the agents over to the alien monitor. After retrieving Keisha, they had sent another drone through the gate to monitor the entire room. Since the view only showed the observation window, there was no other way to see what was happening in the chamber on Phaeton.

As the agents joined Ellis at the terminal transmitting the drone footage, they saw the door at the other end opening. Only a limited view inside could be made out. Computer terminals being manned by othermen could be made out. Presumably, a control room, the humans suspected this was the place where the gateways and engines were being operated.

Six othermen stepped into the room and the door closed behind them. They resembled regular othermen but were, unlike most of them, fully clothed. Dressed in full black armor and wearing helmets, they made Ellis think of either knights or samurai. Especially given the tight marching formation as they went over to the portal. Not the one to Lagoda, but the one connected to Somnus.

The lead otherman looked up at the drone. He knew it was there, of course. Probably, the control room

behind the door had detected everything the humans had done there. But they had not interfered or intervened.

They did now. The otherman raised some kind of weapon, not unlike a handgun, and shot the device. But the humans could still see the room from their own portal. The commander of these othermen pressed some controls on the portal leading to Somnus. The laboratory disappeared, replaced by a view of a dry seabed. In the background was a hill with an ancient city atop it. The squadron went through and paid no more heed to the observing humans.

Aaron and Ranyos were discussing possible defenses of Mariamne with Dressler. Now that a skirmish with the Society had taken place, they all felt an escalation of hostilities was inevitable. Ranyos believed the tanks should be moved from the city down to the seabed.

Dressler agreed and had them deployed. As they moved out, however, something in the sky moved over the sun. They craned their necks and saw Phaeton had gotten close enough to create a partial eclipse. Not enough to block the sun; the body was too small. But enough to be noticed from the surface.

J-Par and his people stopped patrolling and gathered together. The farmers stopped their work, too. It got very quiet in the vicinity of Mariamne as the othermen watched the skies with anticipation.

“Why are they acting like that?” Dressler asked Ranyos.

“The Mariamne tribe remembers something of the work,” Ranyos answered. “The scientists stationed here they call ‘wise ones.’ Since they created the Society and the modern strains of othermen, they are regarded as demigods by J-Par and company. Second only to the

lights. They believe some of the wise ones escaped into space in the last battle and will one day return. Every time Eurobus passes by, they wait in expectation."

"Is Kymeros the truth behind the story?" Dressler asked.

"Yes, human. Truth indeed."

A voice called in the wind. The humans and othermen looked all around. Then, several dark shapes appeared. J-Par pointed excitedly at them.

"The wise ones!" he exclaimed. "They return! At last, they return!"

And so they had. Aaron saw othermen before him, dressed in armor and carrying what looked like some kind of sidearm. The one in front approached the group. While the humans tensed, the othermen ran forward. They bowed before the newcomers and chanted reverently.

Even Ranyos inclined his head in respect. “Welcome, Kymeros. I have prepared the way for you.”

Kymeros looked at the kneeling othermen. “Rise,” he told them. “I am no divinity.”

J-Par complied, and the others under his command followed. “It is good to have you back one more, wise one.”

“Nor am I a ‘wise one.’ The scientists who altered the world are dead. I am the last general of the West, and my squadron is what remains of our grand army.”

He looked up at Ranyos and a slight sneer curled his mouth. “I trust these aren’t the only Outliers, Ranyos? I would be disappointed if our entire race has fallen so.”

“J-Par may be primitive, Kymeros, but he is not stupid,” Ranyos said, frowning. He had been following the general’s orders for some time now and rarely questioned them. Still, he felt compelled to defend the

tribe which had taken him in when he had been a wanderer. Who had also graciously allowed the other Outliers to join them.

Kymeros turned his attention to the two humans. Each group studied the other thoughtfully.

“I know of you,” Kymeros said. “But this is the first time I’ve seen you in person.”

“I am Colonel Dressler, of Earth,” the colonel said. “This is Aaron Adams. How do you know us?”

“As you’ve been told, my men escaped the Thought War,” Kymeros began. They began walking up the hill, led by Ranyos. J-par and the others followed at a respectful distance. Once they reached the summit, Kymeros looked over the seabed.

“I remember when the ocean was here,” he offered. “The disintegration bombs devastated the surface.

Where my nation once was, the ocean now resides. And this, a wasteland."

"We will make new nations," Ranyos told him. "New peoples."

"Ranyos stumbled upon the computer lab," Kymeros told the humans. "The West had begun to explore the heavens before the Thought War broke out. A small base was put on Eurobus. My men and I put ourselves in stasis until the scientists of Mariamne deemed it safe enough to return to the surface."

He glanced at J-Par, who bowed again. "But the other inhabitants forgot their purpose. So, we drifted alone, frozen, forgotten. For who knows how long."

They resumed their walk to the central building. Passing the place where the humans had made their temporary headquarters, they were hailed by the humans standing guard.

“Colonel?” one of them asked, seeing the new arrivals.

“As you were,” Dressler reassured them. They saluted and made no move to hinder the party. Aaron noted Kymeros didn’t even spare them a second glance. Clearly, he saw the humans as no threat.

For some reason, it worried him.

“So now, you’re here,” Dressler said. “Now what? Why are you involving yourself in this new conflict?”

“Because it isn’t a new conflict,” Kymeros said. “I now realize the Thought War never actually ended. It went dormant for ages but never ended.”

They entered the central building, went to the computer lab and sat down. Kymeros looked around at the lab, remembering the last time he had been here. “The goal of this installation was to create a new otherman and culture. One combining the best aspects

of East and West. The group and the individual. Instead, the so-called Society is just another version of the East. And these refugees, these Outliers, are all that's left of the West."

They inspected the gateway there. The room on Phaeton was visible. They also saw the drone from Earth still monitoring.

"Your fellows are still searching my base," Kymeros told Dressler. "Why?"

"We still have personnel who have been put into a coma back on Earth," Dressler said. "We suspect the Society, but we don't know how. We don't even know what equipment they do or don't have."

"They have, I believe, nothing more than an interference field to block teleportation," Kymeros said. "Otherwise, I would have used the gateways to travel there directly and capture their queen."

He adjusted some of the portal's controls. The view vanished, replaced by static. A sound like white noise emanated from the gate, different from when it was focused on nowhere. Clearly, it was trying to hone in on something and was being blocked.

After demonstrating this, Kymeros switched back to Phaeton.

"Then how are they affecting humans back home?" Aaron asked.

"They aren't. I am."

"What?!" Aaron and Dressler demanded in unison. Even Ranyos felt surprised. Of course, he knew this, but hadn't expected the general to be so forthcoming. Was he preparing to renegotiate with the humans?

"I didn't completely reproduce your device," Kymeros went on. "I also added a thought device to the gate's workings. By combining the two, I can

communicate, or coerce, across distances the East only dreamed of."

"What's the meaning of this?" Dressler demanded. "Why would you…"

"Your weapons. Your tanks and guns. There are virtually no advanced weapons left. It's possible a cache or two is hidden somewhere, but by the time it would be found, Eurobus would be headed out of the vicinity of Garobus. The time to overthrow Arachne is now."

"And you're holding the humans hostage," Dressler accused.

"Including a friend of mine," Aaron added. "So, what, you hurt or kill them if we don't fight with you?"

"You won't let it come to that, I trust," Kymeros said.

"This isn't our war, general," Dressler protested. "We only came here because we thought the Society was invading us. All the time, it was you. I'll bet the fight in

Erebus, the two strangers, were planted by you too, weren't they?"

"Deceiver," Aaron said, glaring at Ranyos. "I actually trusted you."

Ranyos looked down. "Part of me is sorry," he told the humans. "But I spoke the truth when I said we need your help."

"You claim this isn't your war," Kymeros said. "But I'm afraid, for the time being, it is. Fight well, and I will release your people. Fight poorly, or not at all…"

He trailed off and looked intently at the humans.

Epilogue

Arachne and the Pilot watched as workers brought in gardening tools. Pruning hooks, shovels and rakes were being reshaped and reforged into spears and swords. The smiths worked tirelessly, and the drones

showed other workers how to use their newfound weapons.

“We will need to head for Mariamne once our people are fully armed,” she told the Pilot. “We will also be taking the disintegration bombs. All of them. If ever we needed them, it is now.”

“You are sure?” the Pilot asked.

“Every day we delay is another day Ranyos grows stronger.”

“It would seem so,” the Pilot agreed grimly. It was hard for him to come to grips with. After ages of uninterrupted peace, war was returning to Somnus. He had gone over the events leading up to it all over and over in his head. How had it come to this? Could anything have been done differently?

“Perhaps we should make one last embassy to the humans,” the Pilot suggested. “Offer to let them tour the

hive after all. Perhaps they will relent when they see we have no gateway."

"No, they'll never believe us now," Arachne replied. "They'll just assume we hid or dismantled it. Besides, do you think Ranyos will let them make peace? The Deceiver will spin another web of lies to make us the guilty ones. No matter what we do."

Cephus entered the forge area, with half a dozen workers. They picked up spears for themselves and filed back out. She shook her head in mingled disgust and dismay.

"I thought I was being merciful to him," she muttered. "I should have simply killed him. Then none of this would have happened."

The Pilot didn't know how to answer.

Also by Matthew Striegel:

1) Kayraan (2005)
2) Necromancer (2008)
3) Through the valley of shadow (2009)
4) The othermen (short story collection) (2010)
5) Necromancer 2: the awakening (2010)
6) Necromancer, Rosedog edition (contains the content of Necromancer and Necromancer 2) (2011)
7) Season of Winter (2012)
8) The distant moon (remake of Kayraan) (2020)
9) Tales of the Necromancer (2020)
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12) Inana, Queen of Apsu (2022)
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14) Necromancer, the ancient evil (2022)

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19) The othermen (novel) (2025)

20) Helen Ferris (2025)

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22) 0therman’s War (2026)